Forbidden and Forgotten

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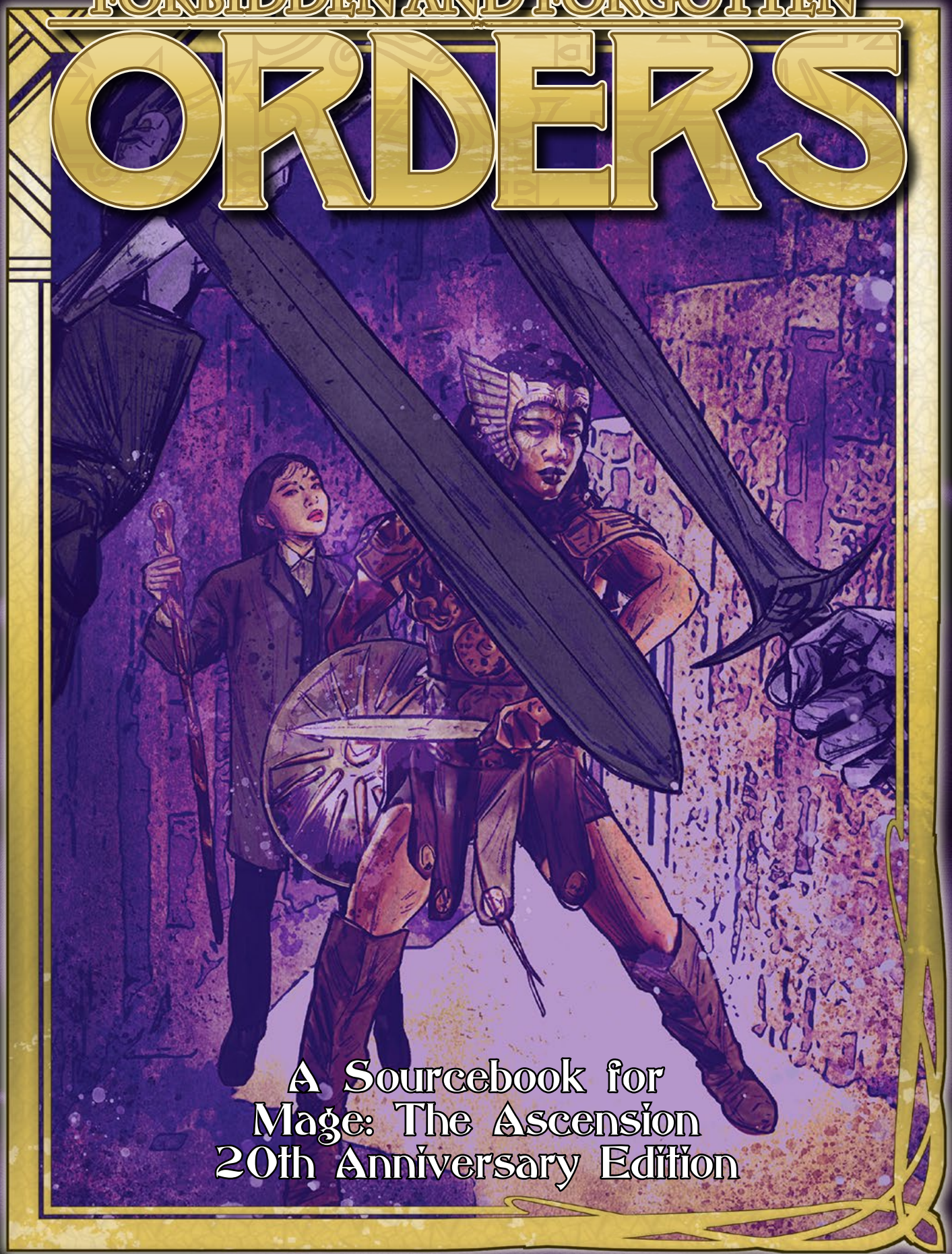

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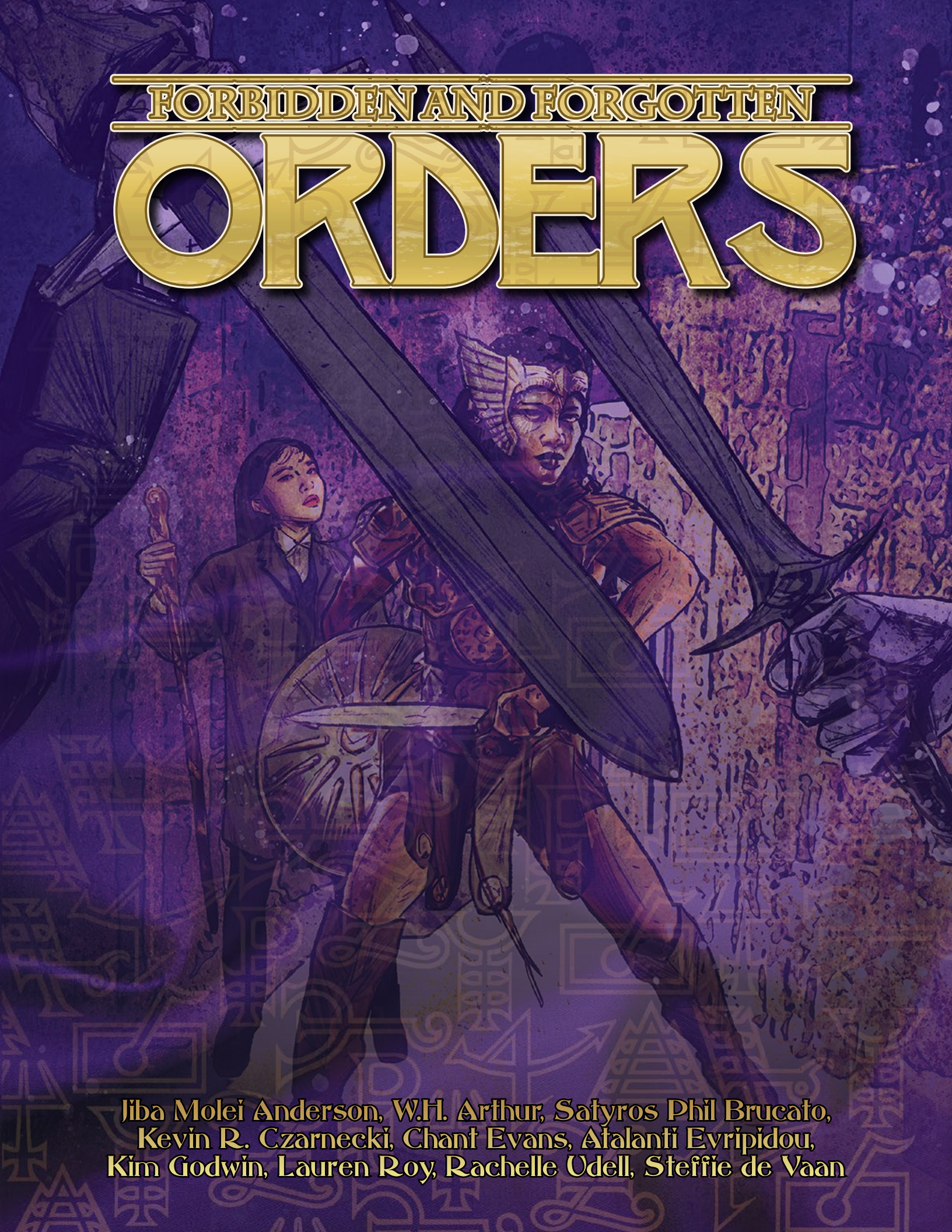
FORBIDDEN AND FORGOTTEN
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Introduction: Taking Care of Our Own

My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.

— Bishop Desmond Tutu

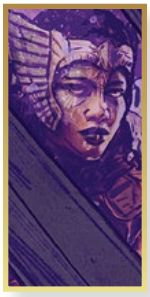
Standing Ground

We die without cooperation. People die. Cultures die. Species die. For centuries, the so-called "Disparate Crafts" — a name, like "orphans," imposed by outsiders — nurtured their own people and withdrew from the global war for Reality's future. As our world slides toward possible oblivion, however, alliance seems the surest path toward survival.

And so, an unlikely Alliance was formed.

Where things go from here is anybody's guess.

How to Use this Book



Forbidden and Forgotten Orders explores the metaphysical societies that make up the paradoxically named Disparate Alliance: who they are, how they function, the ways in which they approach their Awakened Arts, and more. We'll deal also with the metaplot options surrounding the Crafts and their relationships to the more famous factions of Mage's Ascension War. Most importantly, we'll also clean up some old errors of language and culture that occurred in the days before worldwide media made it easier to catch such errors. Rather than a compilation of previous material, this book reveals the Crafts as they stand today, three decades into the 21st century.

We've ordered them in three broad chapters — broad being the operative word for Crafts so internally diverse and conflicted — based on their commitment to the Alliance. For an alliance as young — and, make no mistake, small — as the Disparates, how (or if) it manages to hold on to its partners and individual identities in the near future is crucial to its long-term survival.

Chapter 1: Forerunners. They want (or need) this Alliance to work — for good or ill, their eggs are in the Disparate basket. If the Disparate Alliance ever risks taking

a stance in the Ascension War, this is where that push comes from. The forerunners count the Ngoma, Knights of the Temple of Solomon, Taftâni, and Hollow Ones.

Chapter 2: Middlers: They're here, it's cool, and they'll give the alliance a fair shake, but it's not everything to them. Eventually they'll have to come off the fence — are they in or out — but for now they're comfortable right where they are. The Middlers count the Ahl-i-Batin, Kahu (formerly known as the Kopa Loei), Sisters of Hippolyta, and Wu Lung.

Chapter 3: Outsiders: They were invited to the party, and they did come, but now they're standing awkwardly by the punchbowl and wondering how long it will even last. They're not necessarily wrong — the Crafts carry a lot of old mistrust and bad history between them. The outsiders count the Bata'a, Solificati, and orphans.

Future Fates

Among the many possible metaplot elements circulating through the **Mage 20** series, the Disparate Alliance may be the one which depends most upon the choices made by a **Mage 20** Storyteller. Did that Alliance begin in the ashes of Concordia? In the blood spilled by Technocratic genocide? In treachery? Ambition? Corruption? Delusion? So many possibilities. Which will you choose?

The Ascension Warrior

In the **Ascension Warrior** trilogy, a mysterious archmage claiming to be the reincarnation of the Solificatus Heylel leads a massive assault of disgruntled mages against Horizon. Hollow Ones emissary Jeremey Case leads a pack of orphans and Hollower renunciates in an assault on Horizon's stronghold city, Concordia. Their clocks are subsequently cleaned, but Case and some associates survive. (For details, see **Mage 20**, p. 201, **Tales of Magick: Dark Adventure**, pp. 60-61, and the climactic chapters of the **Mage** novel **War in Heaven**.)

This event, occurring in the mid-90s, is "officially" canon. In **Mage 20**, of course, canon is whatever you want it to be. If it *did* happen, however, then many of the Ascension Warrior's troops were orphans and other non-Tradition mages whipped into a frenzy against the selfish wizards of the Horizon Council. Heylel was ultimately revealed as a fraud (or were they...?) and their troops were slaughtered in battle or hunted down afterward. That was over 20 years ago. What about the survivors?

- **The Ascension Warrior inspired the Disparate Alliance:** Though the Warrior might not have recruited every convert to their cause, their arguments about the Council made sense to a lot of folks who chose not to storm Horizon. Those who did join the assault either returned with horror stories about the Traditions, or else did not return at all and instead became martyrs in the eyes of those who didn't go. In the quarter-century since the Concordia War, Heylel's example inspired unaligned mages to band together and resist the Traditions' power. Especially if you're using a Fallen Traditions metaplot (see below), the Concordia War may have provided the proof other mages needed before they'd take a drastic step like forming the Disparate Alliance.
- ***What* "Ascension Warrior"?:** The entire thing never happened. Concordia and Horizon still stand. Jeremy Case may still have betrayed the Council's trust in a later assault (see below). Sure, the Council has enemies among unaligned mages, but there was no "Ascension Warrior" to unite them.

The Lightning Purge

In **Mage Revised Edition**, the Crafts were hunted down and massacred by a global Technocracy campaign in 1999. Survivors from that campaign sought shelter within the Nine Traditions. That idea was retconned in **Mage 20th Anniversary Edition**, with **The Book of Secrets** (pp. 261-263) providing more details; the Union may or may not have waged that purge, but most survivors went underground and joined forces. The Disparate Alliance is the result.

With regards to the lightning purge metaplot, a Storyteller has the following options:

- **They missed most of us:** The Technocracy's campaign, brutal as it was, missed the majority of Craft mages. It still killed *a lot* of people, though, and the surviving Disparates harbor a blood-hate against the Union. This option assumes a ruthlessly evil Technocracy, not a misguided Union with heroic tendencies.

- **The purge was overstated:** Although Technocracy agents cracked down on a few scattered mages (some of whom might have deserved it), the strike against the Crafts existed mostly in rumors. Those rumors led to the formation of the Alliance, however, because they revealed how vulnerable the Crafts were if they remained separate.

- **It never happened:** The Technocracy was too busy to worry about a bunch of non-aligned weirdos. The "purge" was just a rumor or misdirection if that element of the **Revised** metaplot existed in your world at all. Even so, the threat of such violence provided impetus to the idea of a Disparate Alliance. In fact, the rumor might have come from the Disparates themselves, who sent agents to infiltrate the Traditions by bearing word of a nonexistent massacre.

Hollow Treachery

According to certain **Revised**-era books, Jeremy Case, the Hollower ambassador to the Council, survived the Concordia War and led the Technocracy straight to Horizon's back door. Given that such an attack would have resulted in thousands of deaths and the annihilation of collective millennia worth of lives and materials, there's no way the Traditions would forgive the Hollow Ones for such treachery. Other **Revised** books ignore this metaplot, and **Mage 20** suggests altering it or else discarding it entirely (see p. 201). Thus, several options exist:

- **The Traditions and Hollow Ones remain at war:** Yep — Case did it, Horizon is gone, and the Council's survivors bear a wicked grudge. The Disparate Alliance was a defensive move against that grudge, and so the Disparates and Council are essentially at war even if the Traditions don't realize quite yet just what they're up against.

- **Oh, *that* asshole? He's not one of us:** It happened. The Hollowers, however, turned Case over to the Traditions personally. Thus, the metaplot element remains intact but there's no ill will between the Council and their former colleagues... well, not much bad blood, anyway.

- **Never happened:** Nope. The Technocracy might still have invaded Horizon, but the Hollow Ones had nothing to do with it. Rumors of such a thing may have inspired the Hollow Ones to seek Disparate allies, but there's no significant animosity between the Traditions and their Darkling former associates.

Assimilation into the Traditions

As a result of the purge, **Revised**-era sourcebooks portrayed Craft mages assimilating into the Traditions. This sourcebook, obviously, asserts otherwise. So, *did* a certain number of Craft mages join the Council's ranks?

- **Nope:** Just ignore that element of the **Revised** metaplot.

- **Some did:** With or without the Technocratic purge, some dissidents from within the Crafts decided they were better off within larger organizations. Why? Maybe those folks fell out with other members of their respective Crafts. Perhaps they felt the Council offered more protection or greater resources. Their "defection" might have been a plan to misdirect the Traditions, the Technocracy, or both. The specifics depend on the defectors themselves, and on the plans of your group's Storyteller. There may well be ill will between the defectors and their original groups, too. Such schisms, after are, are common among real-life metaphysical groups, where bitter factionalism is more the rule than the exception.

- **They did, but it was a setup:** According to **Mage's 20**'s Disparates section, the Alliance formed in response to threats posed by the Technocracy, the Traditions, or both. It's possible, then, that certain agents were sent to infiltrate the Council. The "assimilated" Craft mages have spent the last two decades building networks, alliances, and traps within the Nine Traditions, funneling information to the Disparate Alliance. If and when the word comes down from Alliance leadership, the Council may find itself undermined from an enemy it didn't even know was there.

The Fallen Technocracy

Many **Mage** sourcebooks suggest a "Fallen Technocracy" that's a cross-dimensional hyperweapon aimed at Reality itself. If this is the case, then the Alliance might be humanity's last, best hope. If it's not true, it's *still* how many people within the Disparate Alliance view the Technocratic Union. Disparate mages distrust the Union. Are they correct to do so?

- **Oh, hell yes:** The Technocracy is guilty of everything the Crafts accuse them of doing. Lighting Purge? Check. Global genocide? That much is obvious. Crushing the spirit of humanity underneath the steel boots of mechanized command? Have you looked at the world through the eyes of people

beneath those boots. The Crafts have, and they see the truth. Technocratic ideals cloak malign, perhaps Nephandic, realities, and a bloody showdown between the Union and Alliance is inevitable.

- **Maybe not Nephandic, but...:** The Technocracy is awful. Maybe not intentionally malign, but indisputably guilty of atrocities. Alliance mages might be looking for Fallen puppet masters where there are actually "just" ruthless people whose good intentions cause horrific results. If Technocrats actually *did* try to exterminate the Crafts, soul-shriveling corrupters are no excuse. The Union doesn't need hidden masters in order to do evil things.

- **The Union *is* infected, but idealistic Technocrats fight to save it from itself:** The "John Courage option" sees well-intentioned Technocrats choosing unlikely allies in an effort to purge the Union's malignancies. Some of those alliances may (as in the Prelude for **Technocracy: Reloaded**) include members of the Crafts, like the Templar Brother Oliver Lyon. Such associations are tentative at best, with lots of side-eye on all fronts. Everyone involved is taking awful risks; when the future of human reality is involved, though, such risks seem worth their price.

The Fallen Traditions

What if **Mage**'s "good guys" were not? After all, there's some pretty awful stuff going on in even the most generous view of the Traditions. What if all that "Mythic Ages" hooey is a smokescreen for a corrupted magickal elite? If anyone other than the Technocracy would realize that possibility, it would be fellow mystics. This metaplot option certainly explains the "defection" of Disparates who signed on for Council membership: They're sleeper agents digging up dirt and finding weaknesses for an inevitable clash with magick's supposed "saviors." In this light, Jeremy Case looks heroic, not treacherous. Some Craft mages certainly believe this is true. *Are* the Traditions Fallen, then?

- **Yeah, they're evil:** With or without Nephandic influence, the Traditions pose a significant existential threat to Reality as we know it. Their selfish "Ascension" ideals would enslave humanity to chaotic predation. What better world, after all, would you expect from a convocation of snobby wizards, malign time-hippies, gore-drenched witches, and assassins who claim their "enlightenment" as excuses to run wild? The Disparates allied for a reason, and at least part of that reason involves a global conspiracy of murder-happy mages who believe they have Reality's best interests at heart.

- **Unintentionally malign:** As with the Technocracy, the Traditions have a messy history. Craft members see through the rainbows-and-unicorns propaganda, viewing the Traditions as the metaphysical imperialists they, in many respects, are. Okay, so the part about Nephandic archwizards at the top of the Council might be exaggeration. Given the behavior of many Traditionalists, though, can you blame the Crafts for believing it?

- **Nope:** Despite Tradition extremists like Doissetep's stormy archmasters and the House of Helekar, the Council really *is* as close as Mage comes to "the good guys." Disparate suspicions, while understandable, are misdirected. The Council has firm laws to rein in their group's zealots, and the newer generation works hard to reform the calamities of previous eras. (For details, see **The Book of Secrets**, pp. 212-222, and the sourcebook **Lore of the Traditions**.)

Nephandic Pawns

What if it's all backwards? Perhaps the Alliance itself is the product of Nephandic machinations — unknown to most Craft members but pointed like a dagger at the other factions. Jeremy Case may have been an agent of Fallen chaos, stabbing every back he could reach even when his mortal hand could no longer hold a blade. Tradition and Technocracy atrocities, while valid, might have been exaggerated for effect by manipulators pushing Disparate Crafts toward an unstable, potentially ruinous unification. While this seems unlikely, stranger things have happened in the World of Darkness. Could this be the true origin of the Disparate Alliance?

- **Um, no:** Unlikely as the Alliance might seem, its founders' concerns were real enough to bring those groups together without hidden string-pulling. Besides, the Batini and Templars have battled Nephandi for centuries; while both groups certainly have blind spots, the idea that Fallen manipulators could scam those groups so thoroughly is absurd. Besides, the idea that so many groups of culturally marginalized people could be secret catspaws to the vilest group in the World of Darkness is tone-deaf at best. So, no. The Disparates are their own people, not pieces in a Nephandic endgame.

- **The Fallen didn't forge the Alliance, but:** Were the Disparates pushed into an Alliance by their longtime enemies? No. Have they been steered toward the other factions by misdirections added to legitimate grudges against the Technocrats and Council? Perhaps. It is, after all, the Nephandic way to nurture people's fears and grievances, then stand back and watch human nature take its course. Given the long, ugly history surrounding the Ascension War, everyone has good reason to feel paranoid... and when somebody really is out to get you, paranoia can be the most effective weapon imaginable. Scared people, mages included, tend to jump at shadows; the Fallen excel at manipulating shadows, and if a few people jump to the wrong conclusions in the process, Nephandi count that as a Win.

- **This was the plan all along:** Such delicious irony! Convince groups that have no business sharing an organization that they'll have to band together against a common enemy, shove a few dominos over here and there, and stand back as the world burns! What could be more fun, from a hellbent corrupter standpoint, than tricking some of your worst enemies into a doomed Alliance whose attentions are pointed as far from you as possible — and do it by convincing them that they've banded together to fight you when, in fact, they'll wind up fighting each other? This metaplot option is convoluted even by **Mage** standards, gives the Fallen too much credit, and is (as noted above) offensive when you consider how many Disparates are People of Color, women, queer, or some combination of them all. Honestly, we don't recommend it.

The Crafts, Revealed

As of 2014, when the **Mage 20** rulebook appeared, the Disparate Alliance was a well-guarded secret. Has that situation changed in the intervening years? If so, how has that shifted the balance of powers between **Mage**'s various factions?

- **Nope — still a secret:** Although handfuls of individual mages realize the extent of the Disparate Alliance, and Technocratic and Tradition data sources recognize the continued existence of the Crafts, the full scope of the Alliance remains largely unknown. The effort involved in that degree of secrecy is intense; even so, these are groups and people who are used to avoiding detection, so it's not surprising they know how to maintain a low profile. Scrying and mind-magick work both ways, after all, so although their rivals use extraordinary methods to uncover information, the Alliance employs those same methods to keep their organization secure.

- **It's an open secret:** Although no one's running around making Disparate Alliance T-shirts, most Ascension War bigwigs are aware that the Crafts merged into a larger and more formidable entity. Depending on who you ask, the reaction has ranged from "*Oh, shit – another one!*" to "*Good – more power to 'em!*" The shift has certainly altered strategies among the other factions, with the Technocracy taking special care to avoid underestimating Craft-affiliated Magick-Using Reality Deviants in the future. Depending on the relationship between the Traditions and the Alliance, the Council might be on good terms with their Disparate colleagues, plan contingencies for potential threats from them, or consider them yet another foe in an increasingly complex Ascension War. Nephandi, of course, view this Alliance as a new spoiler and potential tool for misdirection and corruption; that said, smart Fallen recognize the perils posed by a combined force of Templars, Batini, and their equally formidable companions. The overall reaction to this Alliance, then, is wary acceptance tinged with apprehension over what this new gathering of Awakened power-players might do next.

- **The Crafts are out of the bag:** Everybody knows. Many folks aren't happy about the situation. The level of animosity depends a lot on other metaplot elements: A vengeful Alliance exacting payback for a purge will inspire more alarm than a bunch of affiliated mages minding their own collective business. As shown in **The Book of Secrets** (pp. 237-240), "their own collective business" still involves a significant degree of influence and potential grudges against the other factions. Those other factions, then, will keep their eyes on this new rival. At best, a tense détente exists between the Crafts and their fellow magi; at worst, it's an all-fronts war declared in a world already wracked by chaos.

These metaplot options aren't mutually exclusive, of course. You can use some or none of them, mixing them in ways that suit your Storytelling schemes. **Mage** *is*, after all, a game about possibilities, and the obvious story is rarely the underlying truth.

What About the Others?

Mage 20 mentions several other Crafts that were potential Alliance members as of 2014. Subsequent years have seen some groups rise in fortunes; others, for various reasons, have declined.

The Balamo'ob

Cartel wars, pandemics, corporate maleficence, government crackdowns, and the ongoing strife between factions in the Amazon have bled this sect nearly to extinction. Although poised for resurgence in the early 2000s, the People of the Jaguar have since been scattered, hunted down, slain in combat, or absorbed into other sects. A handful of them probably remain independent and alive. That number, though, is too small to be considered a Craft in its own right.

Rumors hold that the sect has assembled secretly in numbers too great to ignore; soon, those tales insist, the Jaguar will take back his domain. For now, though, such rumors seem to be wishful thinking at best. Time will speak the truth.

The Go Kamisori Gama / Itsutsu Gama

For a time, it seemed like the hypertech ninjas of the Itsutsu Gama ("Five Sickles," known erroneously by outsiders as the Go Kamisori Gama) shared the Alliance's hatred for the Technocracy. Elaborate negotiations, enhanced with intense ritualism and a handful of flamboyant escapades, seemed to point toward the sect's acceptance within the Alliance. After all, in a fight it's good to have some ninjas by your side. The Wu Lung, however, had centuries of experience with Japanese mages in general, and an unhealthy amount of contact with ninjas. The Chinese Disparates smelled a rat... and indeed, said rat was eventually found.

The Gama's public face (insofar as ninjas *can* be "public") turned out to be an elaborate, almost farcical façade. While a sect of cartoonish "ninjas" drew attention with their media-friendly antics, the real Itsutsu Gama operated unseen. This group, at first glance, appeared to be a boring collection of Japanese salarymen carrying out mundane tasks in near anonymity. In truth, the Dragons realized, the actual ninjas used influence, finance, and subtle yet sophisticated tech to carry out the sect's operations.

As may be expected, the Dragons prepared their findings with exacting certitude, then presented them to leaders from the other Crafts. Negotiations ceased. Realizing their cover had been blown, the Itsutsu Gama

disappeared. The salarymen faded into the anonymous masses, their offices abandoned by the time Disparate agents followed up on the discovery. The baroque "superninjas" disappeared as well. Although the Alliance braced for retaliatory attacks, none came.

The Itz'at

With the same enigmatic acumen they displayed upon discovery around 2012, these Maya time-priests disappeared off the Crafts' radar around 2020. Their parting message, chiseled in archaic Yucatec on a washed and polished stone, roughly translates as, "Good luck, you fucking idiots."

The Mirainohmen

As certainties about identity, gender, cultural divisions, and the nature of "truth" slide further down the internet drain, the ranks of the Nohmen seem to rise. Whether or not these tricksters actually have become more numerous in recent years is as mysterious as their mundane identities... assuming, of course, that the Mirainohmen possess anything resembling mundane identities anymore. As far as outside observers have been able to tell, the Nohmen aren't merely *trans*humanists anymore — they're *xtro*humanists, striving toward a level of evolution so removed that it might become a separate species or entity entirely. Have they achieved that end yet? Hard to say. Members of the Crafts who've dealt with the Future Masks have a hard enough time telling one Nohman from another. Those folks almost never appear the same way to the same person twice.

According to Disparate sources (that may or may not be accurate), the Nohmen have embraced the Digital Web to a degree that makes Virtual Adepts seem conservative. For while the VAs still view (for the most part) the Web as a technological manifestation that deals with human beings, the Mirainohmen reputedly deal with it as a Great Kami composed of other kami, interacting with kami that used to be mortal human beings. Again, this idea might just be another prank on the part of the Nohmen, whose discourse on the subject confounds Alliance emissaries. The Crafts, overall, agree that the Nohmen would make a fine addition to their group... assuming someone could get a straight answer out of one of them who *is* consistently who they appear to be. The headaches involved with dealing with the Masks thus far make them unlikely candidates for full membership. Like everything else about the Mirainohmen, however, that impression is subject to change.

Navalon

The Harbingers of Avalon (**Technocracy: Reloaded**, p. 118) have existed within the Technocratic ranks for a century or more. Given the stresses within the Union (possibly exacerbated by the Dimensional Anomaly, the lightning purge, the Fallen Technocracy, or other metaplot options), these hypertech knights began seeking an exit strategy in the late 1990s. While the main group appears to have remained within the Union's ranks, at least for now, a handful of dissidents fled the Technocracy around 2014. By 2020, this group established itself as Navalon: A splinter faction combining Technocratic hypertech with Arthurian ideals. Whether or not the remaining Harbingers choose to join them, that group now features roughly a dozen Enlightened members and several dozen extraordinary citizens. Small as that sect might be, it's large enough to be considered a Craft — a Craft with enough militant hardware and combat experience to provide the Alliance with a literal fighting edge.

Numbering six "knights" and about 60 support personnel, this Navalon group assumes Round Table code names: Kay, Tristan, Percival, Gawain, Enid and, of course, Galahad. Given the precedent of Camelot, no one wants to become Lancelot or dares assume the roles of Arthur, Guinevere, or Merlin. These knights employ hypertech armor and weapons when they can get away with using them openly, and enhanced "modern" armor and weapons otherwise. Navalon's knights have skirmished on behalf of the Alliance in several incidents. The exact nature of those engagements (and the opponents involved) is left to the Storyteller's discretion. Although they're not yet large or established enough to be considered a full Alliance Craft, that appears to be the future of this group.

The Red Thorn Dedicants

It seemed like a good idea: A small but dedicated sect of intelligent cannon-fodder with a gift for nature magicks and a pedigree reaching back past Babylon. Discussions about their inclusion among the Disparates foundered, however, over the question of Lilithian devotees within an already fractious Alliance. Hollower and Solificati representatives seemed to approve. Dragons and Weavers saw a certain ruthless appeal in pointing a bunch of blood goddess-worshippers in the direction of their mutual enemies. Most other Allies held their peace. Two others certainly did not.

In a rare display of agreement, the Hippolytoi and Templars flat out refused to consider a bunch of pain-obsessed Lilith freaks as potential allies. This vehement

coalition of two generally antagonistic sects convinced the others to abandon the idea. The Red Thorns' petition has been politely yet firmly declined.

The Thunder Society

Following the events at Standing Rock and the defection of Xoca and a sizable number of Dreamspeaker Traditionalists, the Thunder Society has grown in numbers, influence, and metaphysical might. Conservative estimates place the sect's membership at several hundred unAwakened practitioners and over a dozen Awakened members. Those estimates are indisputably low; the true membership could be 20 times those amounts, or more. *Much* more.

By all reckonings, the Thunder Society is a Craft in its own right. Possibly a larger one than many of the Alliance's "official" groups. Given their experiences with non-Indigenous people, however, the Thunders remain undeclared. Strong arguments have been made within the Society both for and against association with the Disparate Alliance. As far as the other Crafts are concerned, the invitation's on the table. Whether or not the Thunders choose to accept it remains to be seen.

The Uzoma

Despite deep ties between the Bata'a and the Uzoma, and perceptions that the latter had been absorbed into the former, a small number of Journeymen retain their independence from the larger Craft. For a while, it seemed like the tensions between those groups would ease enough for the Uzoma to join the Alliance as a Craft in their own right. Sadly, the presence of so many white, Muslim, and Christian Allies, combined with the Bata'a focus on the modern world over ancestral heritage, drove a wedge between Uzoma holdouts and the Disparate Alliance. Considering how warily the Templars regarded the Yoruba sorcerer-priests (thanks to accounts of Nhanga atrocities in Liberia, Mali, Sierra Leone, and other hot spots), the entire idea was a hard sell on all sides. Like so many potential Allies, the Uzoma have decided, at least for now, to focus on their communities rather than join a larger group and get drawn, quite likely, into yet another war.

How Does This Alliance Work?

A fractious yet determined lot, the Allies function through a system of mutual respect and a policy of *Don't start none, won't be none*. Strong arbitration, strict enforcement against violations, and a hands-off policy if members of one group offend members of another have kept serious disputes to a minimum... for now.

Although details about the Disparates' laws, protocols, enforcements, and influence among their communities can be found in **The Book of Secrets** (pp. 233-240), their structure can be summed up like this:

Equality

No Craft within this group is regarded as superior or inferior to any other. While this protocol was a hard sell to groups that prize hierarchy, practicality won the argument. Within individual Crafts, of course, hierarchy is a matter of each group's preference. When emissaries gather, though, that grungy Hollow kid is afforded equal status to the elder Dragon Wizard who can count his ancestors back to Shi Huangdi's unification of China. Because so many Alliance members have been oppressed by outside cultures, this assurance of equality provides an essential step in cooperation between such literally disparate sects.

Protectorates

To safeguard those lives, each Craft has *protectorates*: populations and cultures considered to be "hands off" for all other Craft mages. In contrast to the imperialistic behavior of the Traditions and Technocracy, the Alliance refuses to guide humanity as a whole; instead, the various sects nurture and protect communities associated with each Craft, while leaving everyone else alone unless absolutely necessary. As a result, the Disparate Alliance can't really be considered a faction in the Ascension War. They're not fighting to remake Reality in their image, but instead to defend their people (other Allies included) against outside threats.

Allies Among Allies

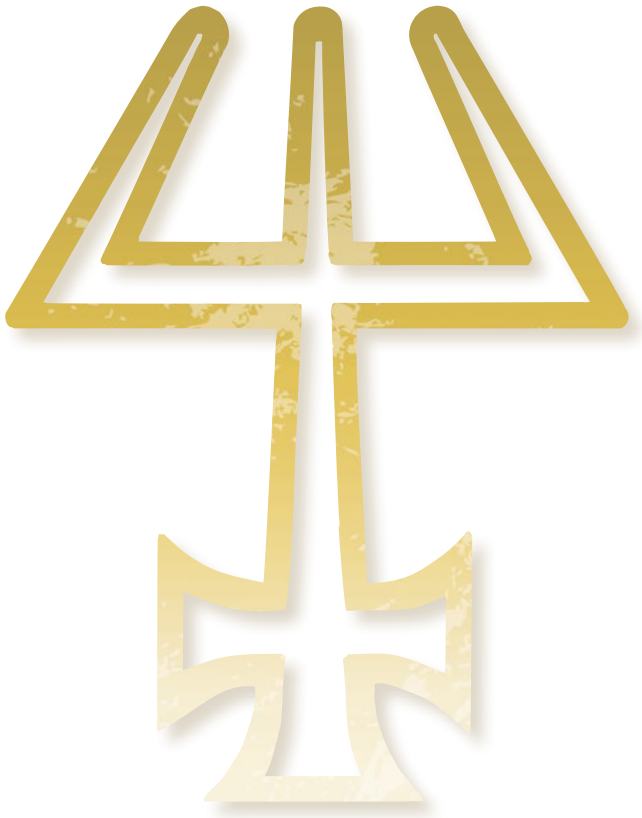
Certain groups share more common ground than others do. You're more likely to find a Hollower or Sister hanging at the Solificati rave than you are to find, say, a Templar or Dragon Wizard there. Even so, the community forged by this Alliance has led to some pretty strange

bedfellows—sometimes literally. Old animosities persist, of course, between diametrically opposed groups, and kinship between similar Crafts remains the rule. The longer the Alliance endures, however, the more its members see each other as *people* rather as *groups*. Rigid lines of culture and division give way to individual relationships, and while an outsider might be surprised to see a kahuna, a priest, and an Amazon toss back drinks while the Goth chick spins a Dubai house remix, growing numbers of Craft mages see that as just another night between friends.

Cooperation

Theoretically, the Alliance is a strategic cooperative formed for mutual prosperity and defense. The reality, of course, is that different people have different needs, views, and priorities. To avoid conflicts, the Allies tend to leave their fellow Crafts to their own devices unless trouble threatens the whole. Consequently, lots of shit gets swept under the rug until someone trips over it. So far, the Adjudication protocols have kept the Alliance from teetering toward collapse. The degree to which it can teeter before collapsing has yet to be tested. Inevitably, though, it will be.

How well things hold up when that happens is anybody's guess.



Chapter One: The Forerunners

And, yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. We are striving to forge our union with purpose.

— Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*

Someone has to be the shepherd even when you're herding cats. That's the forerunners. Some boldly take the limelight because they're ambitious and smart, and they know they can make the Disparate Alliance work. Others are reluctantly pushed forward, but still reluctantly agree to be called.

Up Front and Visible

Taking the role of shepherd requires a certain degree of confidence or even arrogance. Mages among the forerunners are possess both of these traits, and with good reason: they have the status to carry it off. More than an in-game trait, status among mages is a Craft name others recognize, and maybe revere if not fear. To be one of the Ngoma means carrying a lofty mantle. To be a Templar Knight is to be recognized for your Craft's successes, but also its sins and failings. The forerunners are known, and with being known comes expectation.

But being a forerunner doesn't qualify a mage to lead. Status is a double-edged sword. One can be a shepherd and fail to drive off the wolves, lose the flock, and end up surrounded by nothing but meat and blood.

The forerunners, therefore, play a dangerous game. When they succeed they can point to their Craft and say "See, I was made for this." When they fail, other mages point to their Craft accusingly and say "How could you do this?" or worse, "Your Craft must be so disappointed in you."

It can be a burden to wear the weight of responsibility and prestige. When a fall comes, it tends to be titanic in its impact. It's perhaps for this reason so many forerunner surround themselves with mages of other Crafts: it acts as camouflage and hopefully furthers understanding so when things go badly, judgments don't land with harshness.

NGOMA

In times of crisis, the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers.

— T'Challa, *Black Panther*

Ants and Avatars

The white-haired old man rubbing moisturizing cream into Tishala's scalp with strong, ebony fingers locks eyes with her in the barber shop mirror as he speaks.

"This is most certainly a messenger from the Ancestors. How long has the ant been talking to you in your dreams?"

"Maybe since October of last year."

The massaging fingers stop abruptly, and the old man glares at her. As if summoned on cue, Kamari appears in the empty barber chair beside hers, laughing and shaking his head.

I **told** you it was important, but NAH. You said they were just weird dreams. Nothing to worry about. And now you 'bout to get laid out by magical Unca Remus here, 'cause you didn't listen to ME.

Tishala shoots the lanky young man a side eye colder than liquid nitrogen at the same moment the old man shifts his glare over to the empty chair.

"And how long has he been following you around?"

"About two years," she answers. Then, the penny drops. "Wait. You can—"

"When did you last dream about the ant?" the man interrupts.

"Last night."

"And what did it say to you? Exactly. Try to remember every word, as much as possible."

She grasps at the memory but cannot pull the hazy pieces into anything resembling coherence. Kamari's voice echoes in her head.

I remember exactly what it said.

Tishala takes a breath, allows him to speak through her. "Wakati unakua mfupi. Mbweha aliowatoa kunguru wanapata njaa."

"Time grows short," the man translates. "The jackals that released the crows grow hungry."

"I have no idea what that means."

Something in the old timer's eyes says that he does. Hastily, he wipes his hands on a towel and rummages through a small drawer in the rolling caddy beside him, emerging with a slightly battered flip phone. He presses a few buttons, engages a number on speed-dial, and the party on the other end of the line answers immediately.

"Marcus," the old man says, "I have found the one you are looking for." He listens for the brief reply, then ends the call. Turning his attention back to her, he says, "Stay here. The one you need to talk to is on his way."

"Um...I have plans," she protests.

"Not anymore. This is far more important."

Tishala is still arguing with the barber five minutes later when a dazzling young man with hazel eyes and mahogany skin enters the shop. He is dressed in a crisply tailored three-piece suit complete with pocket watch and a delicate gold fob chain. The cut is modern, as is his bow tie, yet he manages to give off the air of a gentleman out of time, forced to wear what passes for respectable clothing in this tumultuous age.

"Tishala," he says by way of greeting, voice all warmth. His accent is British and posh. "A genuine pleasure to meet you at last. My name is Marcus. Tell me. Is your passport current?"

"Ummm.... Yes," she replies. "Why?"

"We're needed in Scotland."

Both she and Kamari stare at him in dafuq for. Marcus simply smiles and says, "Some idiot billionaire just bought Aleister Crowley's house in Inverness, and now the Ancestors need us to go set it on fire."

Oral Traditions

Transcript of Interview conducted 10/23 with community Elder Ayemi Adebayo

Researcher: Kenyatta Okeke, PhD; Department of Africana Studies, Georgia State University

[Recording Starts]

Kenyatta: Okay, Auntie Ayemi, we're recording. And just to confirm, you *do* give your consent to be recorded for this interview?

Ayemi: I do.

Kenyatta: Excellent. So…Sunday at dinner, I asked you to tell me some of the old stories, and you, ah…you said I should come back today and bring my recorder so you could tell me the *special* ones. So here I am. {laughs}

Ayemi: {laughing} Yes, yes. I believe you are ready. And if I am to pass them on to you, I want to be sure that you get them right. That you have them in my voice and in my words. This is how they were given to me by my elders, and how they were given to them by their elders, on and on through the generations to the very first of us.

Kenyatta: What did you all do before digital audio recorders?

Ayemi: {laughing} Why, we listened and recited them back, and the elders corrected us until we memorized them, word for word, gesture for gesture.

Kenyatta: Nobody ever wrote them down?

Ayemi: Not these stories. At least, not in the same forms as when they are told. Reading is different from telling. Some stories are fine for writing down and reading, but the old stories must be *told*. They must be spoken aloud in the air.

Kenyatta: But surely others have recorded these stories on audio tape?

Ayemi: Perhaps. None that I have ever told them to…except you.

Kenyatta: Why are you letting me record them?

Ayemi: Because Spirit guided me to. Times are changing, and we Ngoma must change with them.

Kenyatta: In goma? Wha—

Ayemi: {interrupts} Enough questions, *kuwaneko*. Listen and learn.

Ta-Ur and Amunet-Ka

The story of the first Ancestor comes to us from Habeshat and Khermit — what Europeans call Ethiopia and Egypt — but even this oldest of stories was ancient when first it was told. What the Habesha called her is lost to us, but the people of Khermit called her Ta-Ur, which means The First, though some say it also means The Great.

Ta-Ur often lay dreaming beneath a tree along the banks of the Nile River, and in her dream, she walked with another: sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, sometimes both, sometimes neither. This other was Amunet-Ka, and they were Ta-Ur's Spirit made manifest. In those days, the world was just beginning to rouse itself from its most recent slumber, and mankind was once again new-born. The memory of those humans who had come and gone before was long forgotten by the spirits, creatures, and beings that inhabit the Unseen Worlds Without Number, so they caused much fear and strife for people all across the Land.

Thus it was that Amunet-Ka came to Ta-Ur in dreams. As they walked together, Amunet-Ka taught Ta-Ur about the Unseen Worlds Without Number and the infinite threads of Life and Light that connect all things within them to the source of all creation. They introduced her to the spirit of the Nile, to the powerful Old Ones who had lived, died, and fallen to dust in the time before the world slept. They taught her the language of living things so that she could talk to the plants and to the animals in turn. She learned to speak the language of the earth, the rocks, the mountains, and the sky. They even taught her how to use drum and rhythm and chant and dance to call upon the Old Ones for favor, protection, healing, and aid when the spirits of the Unseen Worlds became curious or angry or restless, or jealous. Through Amunet-Ka, Ta-Ur became as a beloved child to the Old Ones. From them, she received the gift of sight, and she came to know that there were others who could commune with their Ka and traffic with the Unseen Worlds as she did. These, Ta-Ur called the kartek, those who hold the spark. She and Amunet-Ka taught them, and they, too, became as children to the Old Ones, and they journeyed forth throughout all the lands to seek others and teach those others in turn.

So did Ta-Ur live for a thousand years, and she was mother to many, many generations. She is the First of all our Ancestors and the bridge that forever connects us to the Old Ones.

The Descendants of Ta-Ur

Ayemi: Now, the legends say that Ta-Ur had two daughters: Khermit and Kush, also known as Egypt and Nubia.

Kenyatta: I'm assuming this is symbolic and not literal.

Ayemi: Some might say it is both. Nonetheless, it serves to describe the relationship between the First Ancestor and the rise of ancient cultures throughout the African continent, which we Ngoma call Ki Khanga. The important thing for you to remember as you learn these stories is that they show how the kartek used their rituals of dance and chant and drumming to acquire vast stores of knowledge, wealth, and power. They did so through their connection to the land and their traffic with the Ancestors, the spirits, and the creatures of the Unseen Worlds. This is why Khermit and Kush thrived. It is how we trace our Ancestors to the Tichit and the Nok, who gave rise to the Yoruba, the Soninke, and the Great Ghana Empire. These Ancestors gave birth to the powerful kingdoms of Aksum, Akan, Mali, Kweneng, and the Great Zimbabwe.

[long pause]

Kenyatta: So...you're saying that... magic and spirits are the reason why ancient civilizations flourished on the African continent?

Ayemi: Well, what the colonizers call "magic" and what our Ancestors practiced were two different things. To them, magic is calling upon the supernatural to bend the world to their will, often for personal and selfish reasons. The Ancestors, however, considered themselves arbiters and intermediaries between the natural world that ordinary people can see and the natural world that remains unseen by most. So, the "magic" that they did was less a product of their own power and will and more an application of the knowledge required to contact the unseen world and connect that world with the waking one for the benefit of all.

Kenyatta: And this was the same knowledge and power that came from the union of Amunet-Ka and the First Ancestor?

Ayemi: Yes. That's it exactly. However, it is important that you understand this: The further away the generations got from Ta-Ur, the more her knowledge became distorted, embellished, and even corrupted. Especially when...but I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me begin with the story of the greatest of our Ancestors: the Ngo-Ami, the great wizard-priests of Kush.

The Ngo-Ami and the Glorious Kingdom of Kush

As I said, the kartek were few in number, but over time, they found one another, pooled their knowledge, and formed Schools. These were often based in large cities and served as places where the kartek, or those who showed signs of being so, could learn the mysteries of Ta-Ur from their elders. When the elders decided that a student had achieved mastery of their School's knowledge, they encouraged their new Ngo-Ami to seek out other Schools and learn there. Eventually, the young Ngo-Ami would settle in a town or region and establish a Library based upon the knowledge that they had collected.

Kenyatta: Is this where the mythology surrounding the Library of Alexandria comes from?

Ayemi: PFAAAAH! Alexandria! The whole of the Western world loves to romanticize that pitiful jumble of relics, scraps, and poorly translated parchments! Though I will admit that for the as-yet-unawakened, the collection was a considerable achievement. No, child. The Great Libraries of Khermit and Kush were — and still are — two of the largest and most impressive collections of ancient mystical knowledge the world has ever seen. Only the collections in Jerusalem, Isphahan, Mumbai, and Beijing are worthy to be considered their equal. I am told that the Maya and the Aztec empires had amassed great libraries of knowledge as well, but alas, we fear that knowledge was lost to the colonizers, may the Old Ones grind their bones into dust!

[long pause]

Kenyatta: You were saying? Schools and Libraries...

Ayemi: Ah. Yes. At the height of its power, the Empire of Kush was home to four Great Libraries: Men-nefer and Waset (what the Greeks called Memphis and Thebes) in Khermit and Napata and Meroe in Kush. As more and more Ngo-Ami began to gather in these great cities, the more these Enlightened ones began to collaborate and combine their collected knowledge and experiences. Once they developed the *Ufungoto* — the Key Language used to converse with the residents of the Unseen Worlds — their primacy was all but guaranteed. Nothing succeeds like a secret.

Kenyatta: And nobody else, not even other Enlightened scholars, knew how to speak or translate *Ufungoto*?

Ayemi: Correct. Nor could they write it. That was a major factor. Up to that point, everyone had simply used the Egyptian system of heiroglyphics, but as the Kushites developed their own languages — Meroitic in particular — the Ngo-Ami used that more efficient system as the basis for what we know as *Ufungoto* today.

Kenyatta: Wait. People still speak this Key Language? Right now?

Ayemi: Of course, they do! *I* do. Now stop interrupting me. Where was I? [pause] Yes. Up until the fall of Kush in the 3rd century AD, the Ngo-Ami priesthood served and advised the Pharaohs and the administrators of every major city center along the Nile River. It is even said that King Solomon himself had an Ngo-Ami priestess amongst his most trusted advisors.

Most of our surviving rituals, the chants, the music, the symbols, the dances, all of it, come from the Ngo-Ami of Kush. Through them, the peoples of the Land touched the divine and the most sublime mysteries of the Unseen World. But...wherever there are men and women, there is corruption bred of fear, greed, and petty desire. Why else do you think the invaders came? Persians, Greeks, Romans — so many seeking the knowledge that would grant them the riches, the power, and the prosperity of Khermit and Kush. When the Kingdom collapsed, most of the Ngo-Ami retreated south and west, deeper into the hidden recesses of Ki Khanga. And wherever they went, they prospered. They founded new Schools and Libraries, trained new generations of Ngo-Ami. But wherever they went, the would-be conquerors followed as well.

The Serpent That Hides Is The One That Survives

Ayemi: Do you remember the story of the Jackal and the Asp?

Kenyatta: I do! You used to tell that one to all us kids when we were little. This evil jackal had taken over the land, and he could only be defeated by a snake bite, so he had all the snakes in the land killed. But there was one snake who hid with his family deep in the jungles until everyone thought all the snakes were gone. And then his family came and bit the jackal and all his horrible friends a hundred thousand times while they were sleeping. I remember Rashaad loved that damn story, but mainly I remember you always telling us the moral of the story: The serpent that hides is the one that survives.

Ayemi: Exactly. That is wisdom that sadly comes from bitter, bitter experience. The colonizers knew that a major source of our power came from the Nile, and their fascination with "discovering" the source of those mighty waters brought them deeper and deeper into the heart of Ki Khanga with devastating results. At first, the Ngoma tried fighting them, but they quickly learned that these invaders were also connected to powers from the Unseen Worlds. Powers of darkness, corruption, madness, and destruction.

Understand that the Ngoma and the Ngo-Ami before them had never shied away from dealing with the more sinister denizens of the Unseen Worlds. In fact, much of what modern, as-yet-unawakened people call "voodoo" is based upon the rituals the Ngo-Ami used in their workings with creatures of shadow. However, the colonizers were different. Their relationships with the murky ones smelled wrong, felt wrong. We now know that there are clear distinctions to be drawn between the Enlightened agents of colonization, but to our brethren in that time, they were all the same, all driven by greed and a false sense of their own righteousness and superiority.

Thankfully, these same flaws caused the Technocratic Union to overlook most of our Libraries, and by the time they discovered them, the Ngoma Elders had managed to safely hide the most sacred and important texts. They sent what could not be hidden out of Ki Khanga with scholars and kuwanakada who fled East along the Silk Road. They rest, they committed to memory and burned to keep it out of the invaders' hands. It was a terrible risk, and so very much was lost.

Kenyatta: But they survived.

Ayemi: Some did. Those who kept silent and conducted their rituals under extreme concealment and only in the most dire of circumstances lived to pass on their treasured inheritance. But far too many succumbed to their anger or their need to fight back against the theft of their land and resources. Those who raised their heads and attracted notice died or were abducted and enslaved, their great knowledge dismissed, discarded, or destroyed.

[long pause]

I sense you have a question.

Kenyatta: I do. [pause] I mean...if these Ngo-Ami were so connected to the Ancestors and the Unseen World, if they had that much power, then how were the invaders and colonizers able to get a foothold on the Continent and overthrow them in the first place?

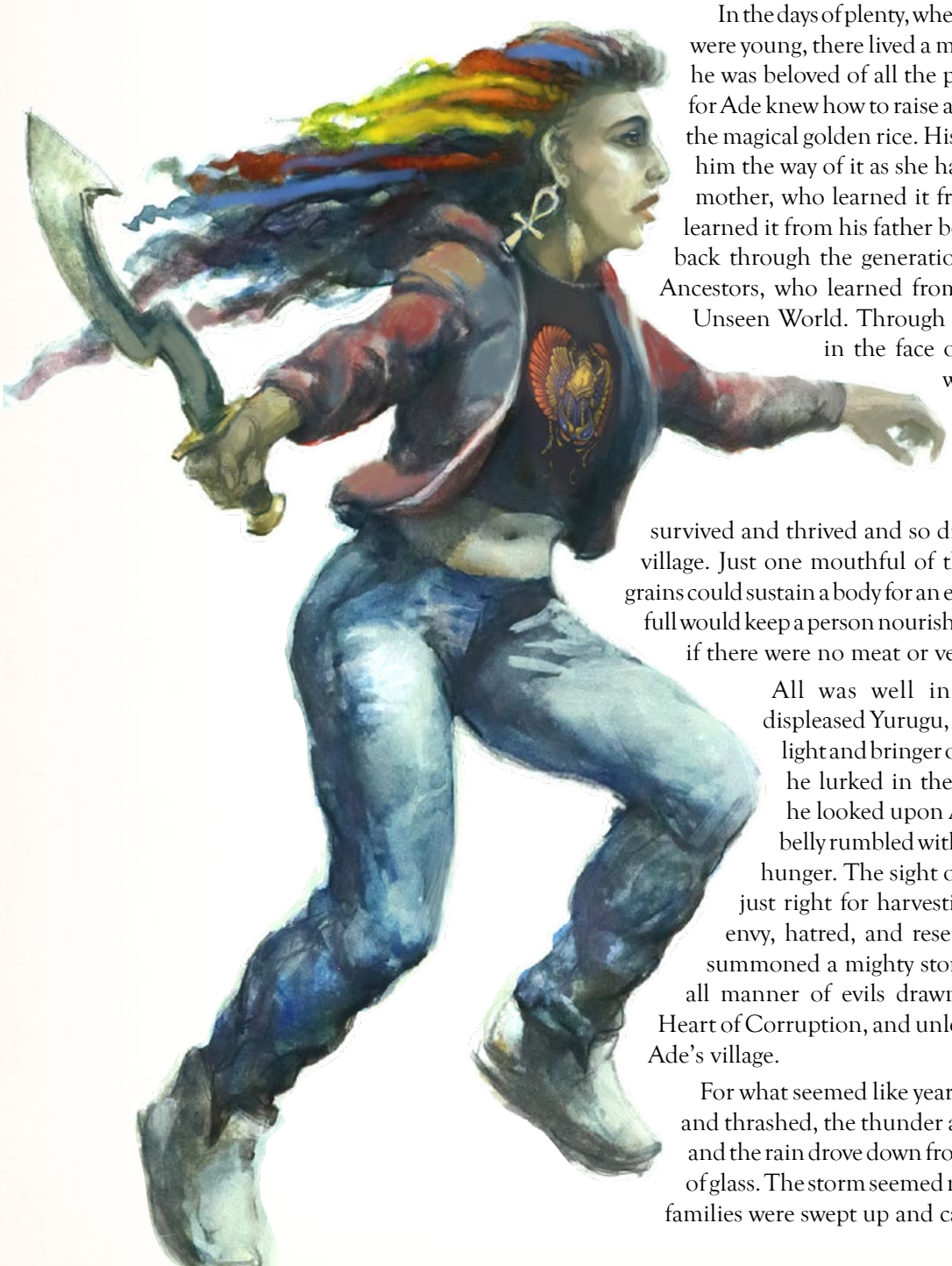
Ayemi: [sighs] That, dear one, is the question of the ages. Some say the Ngo-Ami priesthood strayed too far from the wisdom and teachings of Ta-Ur. Others say that in their arrogance, they offended the spirits and powers of the Unseen Worlds, so those powers abandoned them. These explanations do not make sense to me, nor do I believe they are true given what I know of our people and our traditions. The more likely explanation is that our Ngo-Ami forebears were blinded by overconfidence in their own power, in the power of their allies in the Unseen Worlds, and their connection to the spirits and Ancestors of Ki Khanga. As a result, they underestimated the subtle, clandestine, and devious nature of the Heart of Corruption and the utter depths of depravity and destruction that its agents are capable of.

Kenyatta: They were like the jackal. Convinced that they were invulnerable, or at the very least that their enemies didn't pose any kind of a tangible threat.

Ayemi: And all the while, the Heart of Corruption lay silent and hidden like the serpent, waiting for its moment to strike.

Kenyatta: There are two sides to that saying.

Ayemi: Indeed, there are. It pleases me that you are one of the few who realize it. [pause] Now, I think we have time for one more story today.



Ade and the Golden Rice

In the days of plenty, when even the Ancestors were young, there lived a man named Ade, and he was beloved of all the people in his village, for Ade knew how to raise and harvest *éré kange*, the magical golden rice. His mother had taught him the way of it as she had learned from her mother, who learned it from her father, who learned it from his father before him, back and back through the generations to the very first Ancestors, who learned from the Spirits of the Unseen World. Through drought and flood, in the face of blight or feuding warlords or locusts or any other menace, when all other crops died or were destroyed, the rice survived and thrived and so did the people of the village. Just one mouthful of those sunset-colored grains could sustain a body for an entire day, and a bowl full would keep a person nourished and healthy, even if there were no meat or vegetables to be had.

All was well in the land, which displeased Yurugu, the Jackal, enemy of light and bringer of chaos. From where he lurked in the barren wastelands, he looked upon Ade's fields, and his belly rumbled with the gnawing bite of hunger. The sight of the golden grains, just right for harvesting, filled him with envy, hatred, and resentment. So Yurugu summoned a mighty storm, filled it up with all manner of evils drawn straight from the Heart of Corruption, and unleashed its fury upon Ade's village.

For what seemed like years, the winds howled and thrashed, the thunder and lightning raged, and the rain drove down from the sky like shards of glass. The storm seemed never-ending. Entire families were swept up and carried off across the

horizon, never to be seen again. The creatures of chaos plundered the storehouses, leaving not so much as a morsel behind. Worst of all, Ade's beautiful crop of magical rice was whipped and tossed and uprooted, grain and seed carried off across the wide world.

Satisfied with his destruction, Yurugu relented, and the storm subsided. Ade wept with despair, but the Ancestors sent Anansi, the Clever Spider, to deliver a message to him. "All is not lost," Anansi whispered. "Go forth into the world, Ade, and my brothers and sisters and I will help you find and gather all the grains that have been scattered." And so, Ade journeyed with Anansi across the plains, over the mountains, and through the jungles. He followed the mighty river Niger, gathering up the storm-tossed kernels as he went. Sometimes, the Clever Spider would lead him to a village where the people had discovered the mysterious grains and collected them in the hopes of planting their own crop. To these, Ade taught the ways of éré kange and showed them how to raise the seeds into strong and healthy stalks.

When at last he arrived back home, at least fifty men, women, and children followed behind him, each one carrying a sack of golden grain. And every year after, Ade went forth in search of more hidden seeds, teaching more people how to grow them until he was old and grey and his sons and daughters took up his work. Some say his descendants yet travel the world and will do so until every grain that was lost is found again.

After the Fire, After the Flood: The Ngoma in the 21st Century

(The following excerpt by Kitjito Ayemi Adebayo, Mali School, Minneapolis Library, originally appeared in Ki Khanga Chronicle of Modern Arts and Sciences, *Volume 1, Issue 1: January 2021)*

Where we go from here is perhaps the most pressing question of the modern era, given that the overarching mission of the Ngoma continues to face challenges from the mundane world (climate change, corruption in government, war, disease, etc.) as well as difficulties arising from factions within our own ranks and from Enlightened outsiders. I should like to begin by addressing the latter concerns — those dealing with our internal politics and those connected to our involvement in the Alliance, for as we all know, our decisions and actions in these areas will most certainly impact the as-yet-unawakened in turn. First, let us discuss the most contentious of issues: the initiative to expand the New and Greater Kingdom of Kush.

The New Kush Initiative

The past two decades have ushered in an intensified desire among leading Scholars and intellectuals, both here on the African continent and throughout the people of the Diaspora to challenge the derogatory and dismissive narratives put forth by European colonizers and capitalists, to repatriate stolen artifacts, to reclaim land lost in conquest, and to re-establish systems of knowledge and civil governance that have long been actively suppressed by invaders and other exploitative forces. This desire lies at the heart of what has been called the New Kush Initiative, a vision strongly advocated by members of the venerable Kush and Khermit Schools and spearheaded by Negasi Ahmed and Faisa Genet of the Nepata Library. Advocates of the New Kush Initiative say that it is not enough for the Ngoma to have re-established the Kingdom of Kush as our seat of power in the Enlightened world. They say we should strive to establish a new vision of modern civil society that unites all clans, nations, and tribes, both Enlightened and Asleep, from Tanzania to the Nile Delta in Egypt, and perhaps beyond. Also central to their goals is a quest to reclaim the knowledge and rituals that were, according to them, looted from Napata, the lost Library of Meroe, and the Libraries at Men-nefer (Memphis) and Waset (Thebes). With our Ngo-Ami birthright restored, the Kushites believe the Empire of Khermit and Kush will rise from the ashes, both in this world and in the realms within the Unseen Worlds.

Tied up in this, of course, is the not insignificant matter of publicly calling out the Order of Hermes and demanding that they acknowledge the Ngo-Ami origins of their Tradition. No sane Scholar breathing expects this to ever actually happen, but care must be taken to counsel caution to the more zealous advocates of this ideology. Likewise, there is the matter of those Ngoma who currently operate as members of the Hermetic Tradition. The fact that we exist and have the strength and power that we currently enjoy must be attributed in no small part to the Order of Hermes and their willingness to lend shelter and aid to our forebears when our enemies sought to eradicate us entirely. However, some New Kushites believe that it is these very members of so-called House Ngoma who will be the key to realizing their dream of the Kingdom reborn.

New Schools, Old Legacies

While all Ngoma scholars no doubt dream of studying at the "original" Schools in Zimbabwe, Kush, Khermit, and Mali, as we enter the second decade of the 21st century, the more recently established Diaspora Schools continue

to grow in appeal. Today, one is far more likely to hear an apprentice or new initiate say she plans to seek out a Kitjito in Atlanta, Rio, Nice, Stockholm, or Lisbon, particularly if she has an interest in Alliance politics or a desire to develop skill in using the traditional rituals with contemporary technologies. It can be challenging for those of us born and raised on the African continent to understand this shift towards the Diaspora Schools, and indeed, there are those among the self-styled Inner Circle of the Ngo-Ami who refuse to recognize these enclaves as Schools at all, suggesting that they only rise to the level of respectable Libraries at best. Nevertheless, the kuwanakada continue to flock to these locales, and when they emerge as full scholars, they dazzle and shine in the field with their unique, practical, and powerfully effective rites.

My own research suggests that the Diaspora Schools hold the key to reclaiming the knowledge and magick thought lost to the ravages of time and tragic history. Whispers within the shadowed corners of Libraries everywhere tell of never-before-seen rites emerging from the Americas that eclipse the power of even the oldest rituals preserved by the Scholars of Khartoum. Rumors abound, of course, as to the origins of these new ceremonies. Current speculation is that they are a synthesis of rites created by the first order of Ngo-Ami priests and priestesses — clandestinely recovered from secret Hermetic archives by Kushite agents within House Ngoma — and knowledge carefully preserved by the descendants of Ngoma who fled Ki Khanga to escape invasion, enslavement, and worse. Wherever they come from, the magical teachings emerging from the Diaspora Schools represent an opportunity for all Ngoma to strengthen our knowledge and refine our Craft.

The Disparate Alliance

Of course, the most pressing matter facing the Ngoma is that of the Alliance and the extent of our involvement in it. Based on my research, comprised of hundreds of interviews conducted over the past two years, there exist three major factions within our community which represent the consensus views and attitudes of Elders, Scholars, and Initiates across the globe.

The **Lightbringers** comprise the largest group by far and reflect the popular belief that we Ngoma, along with our supporters within the Alliance, are ready to assume the mantle of leadership and advocate for an expanded, unified Council of Traditions and Crafts. Of course, even within this faction there are varying opinions as to how central a role we should play and how best to navigate the inevitable attacks that will result when we emerge from relative obscurity. Nonetheless, most Lightbringers view the Alliance as a benefit to the Ngoma as a global network, even though it requires us to stand shoulder to shoulder with those whose forefathers contributed to Ki Khanga's downfall.

In direct opposition to the Lightbringers are the **Curators** who embrace a more insular, isolationist view of our mission as Scholars. Adherents of this ideology see little value in the pursuit of alliances with other Crafts and even less in any dealings with the Traditions. Most notably, they are violently opposed to any involvement with the descendants of "tomb raiders, treasure hunters, murderers, and thieves." If such entanglements are necessary, then Curators believe there are only two acceptable outcomes: repatriation of stolen artifacts or revenge and retribution for the harm and damage done. Needless to say, Ngoma within this faction harbor deep distrust of some Alliance members and suspect that betrayal is inevitable if history is any indicator of precedent. Thankfully, they are a small, albeit noisy, minority within the larger Craft community.

The **Meroe Priesthood** is a fast-growing faction amongst younger Scholars from the Diaspora Schools, at least ten of whom have been raised as Oracles over the past decade and a half. This suggests that their views and voices are worthy of attentive examination. With little interest in dwelling upon the injuries and transgressions of the past, the members of this faction advocate for strengthening our ties with Alliance Magi and with those of the Traditions — the followers of Hermes Trismigestus most of all. A war is coming, they warn. The Heart of Corruption even now launches its opening salvos, hidden as always in plain sight and seeming no more dangerous than a newborn calf. The Meroites insist that accurate reconstruction of the original and authentic Mysteries — the ceremonial magicks used by the Temple Priests of Ancient Kush — is possible, but it requires us to actively negotiate for access to the oldest contemporaneous texts and manuscripts of other Enlightened groups. Cultural exchange and information transfer is critical if we are to survive the impending battle. If that means forging friendships with the same Hermetic Mages and Templar Knights who carried off fragments of the Ancient Rites in the first place, then so be it. Re-uniting those fragments into a cohesive, functional whole is well worth setting aside the old animosities. Such grudges matter little in the face of all-consuming evil.

Visions from the Unseen Worlds

Reports from the Oracles of Ta-Ur seem to support the Meroites' arguments, though they caution that visions glimpsed through the doorways of the Unseen Worlds are never certain and should only be used as an exercise in contemplation:

A Challenge Issued. With the strength and backing of our sisters and brothers of the Bata'a and with the support of the Kahu, Taftâni, Ahl-I-Batin and others, the Alliance asserts its strength and demonstrates its effectiveness as a powerful force in the battle against the Heart of Corruption. The Oracles see the Ngoma of New Kush formally challenging the primacy of the Order of Hermes who must grudgingly acknowledge the Ngo-Ami origins of their Tradition. However, they also warn that the path of challenge could lead to a deadly magical war between the Ngoma and the Hermetics, which will only serve the interests of Corruption and the Technocratic forces that are entangled in its web. There is, however, a possibility that factions from within the Order, encouraged by House Ngoma, will confront the Tradition's sordid past and seek reconciliation with the Ngoma on their own.

Our Brethren Rejected. Not all Scholars view our advances with the Alliance, our embrace of the Bata'a, and our desire to reconnect with the Stolen Ones in a positive light. Instead, some choose to dismiss the rites and rituals of these Enlightened ones as rudimentary, crude, and even corrupt. In some worlds, the Oracles see strife and division amongst the Ngoma. Radicals from within the New Kush initiative rise to power and declare themselves the true and only descendants of the Ngo-Ami, sealing off New Kush in both the physical and Unseen planes. This effectively cripples both the Ngoma and the Alliance while creating inroads for the agents of Corruption.

The United Empire of Ki Khanga. Dare we hope that such a future will come to pass as this one glimpsed by the Oracles? In this world, a New Independent Nation of Kush rises. It stands as a shining example of what may be accomplished when Scholars, Disparates of the Alliance, Enlightened members of the Nine Traditions, and even the as-yet-Enlightened of every tribe and nation from Khermit in the north to Tanzania in the south unite as one to defeat the agents of Corruption. There are connecting paths that lead to a unified Empire of Ki Khanga—one that extends far beyond the physical borders of the African Continent, though such a result comes at great cost, no matter the route taken. Along one road, we Ngoma, emboldened by our powerful alliances, assemble an army equipped with ancient, long forgotten weapons of magic and driven to avenge the centuries-long abuse of our people and the systemic theft of our resources. Alliances last only so long as those in power are willing to overlook the sins of imperialism and colonization to win the fight against more insidious foes. After that, we turn on those former friends who remain, and in so doing, we become new oppressors in a world remade in our image. A longer road brings us to a true Golden Age of abundance, equity, and compassion where technology, magic, science, and art combine to Enlighten mankind for millennia. The price is a bitter, bloody, decades-long war, in both the Seen and Unseen worlds as the united Crafts and Traditions battle to once and for all sever the Heart of Corruption from all of Creation. This vision is strong, but dare we share what we have seen with our new friends in the Alliance?

Supporters and Adversaries

Just as the peoples, cultures, tribes, and nations of the African continent are broadly diverse, so too are the modern Ngoma. This is most overtly reflected in the varied missions of the individual Schools and Libraries within the Craft, and it carries over into their attitudes towards the Council, the Traditions, and other members of the Alliance. Painting any of the Ngoma with a broad brush is the height of folly. However, there are some attitudes that appear to be universally held by a majority of Ngoma across the globe, and these we shall detail briefly below.

Primarily, the Ngoma view their membership within the Alliance of Crafts as a beneficial arrangement, though the involvement of certain factions, specifically the Templar Knights, tends to cause considerable grumbling and furrowing of eyebrows among the proponents of the New Kush Initiative. Conversely, the opportunity to reunite with and work alongside the Bata'a is esteemed to be the single most positive development to arise out of the Alliance. Whatever may happen in the future, it is certain that the Ngoma plan to nurture this relationship with their brothers and sisters of the African Diaspora.

Where the Traditions are concerned, attitudes tend to vary by region and locale. Schools grounded in the traditions of Northern and Eastern Africa hold little love and only a grudging respect for the Council of Nine with the notable exceptions of the Chakravanti and Sahajiya. The brunt of their animosity (again, spearheaded by the New Kushites) appears to be aimed at the Order of Hermes, whom they derisively refer to as Dabblers (and, in private conversations, as thieves and usurpers, though these sentiments are rarely aired outside of the Library

of Napata and never outside of the Ngoma community). It is possible that this rancor stems from the Hermetics' view of "House Ngoma" as a sub-sect of their Order. Of course, the Ngoma argue that it is the Hermetics who owe the vast majority of what they know to the ancient traditions of Khermit and Kush. The truth, as is often the case, lies somewhere in between and has sadly been lost to time and the ravages of war and history.

Ngoma from Central, Southern, and Western African traditions seem to adopt a more neutral or ambivalent attitude towards most of the Traditions. However, the Kha'vadi are frequently embraced with warmth and solidarity, particularly by Schools and Libraries located in the Americas and on the Australian continent. The relationship with the Verbenae, on the other hand, is complex and fraught. In Ki Khanga, deep cultural associations between witches and the agents of the Unseen Dark have existed for centuries amongst the as-yet-unawakened. These associations were, of course, exploited, distorted, and encouraged by colonizers backed by the Technocratic Union, resulting in an inevitable encroachment of such biases against Enlightened from indigenous European backgrounds. Nonetheless, attitudes are shifting, as evidenced by the growing number of collaborations between American and European Ngoma and their Verbenae counterparts. After all, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and regardless of locale or tradition, most Ngoma share the Verbenae's view of both the Technocratic Union and the Nephandi as vile, loathsome, never to be trusted, and always worthy of death.

Character and Traits

Now that we've looked at the past, present, and future of the Ngoma, let's talk about playing one in your game.

Concepts

Ngoma walk many paths, but three types are seen almost everywhere they congregate.

The Warrior Scholar

No matter the battlefield — be it literal or abstract, a meeting with envoys from the Council of Nine Traditions, a city council meeting, or the red carpet at the Image Awards — you are the one they send when brains, political prowess, and a thorough education in the combat arts of Ki Khanga are necessary to advance your cause and prevail. Let the ignorant believe what they will about the Ngoma. You know what they don't: that true power combines a mind as quick as Brother Cheetah, a body as strong as Mama Elephant, and a spirit as slippery and versatile as Clever Anansi. Luckily, you always bring that smoke with all three, which makes you an obvious, natural leader.

The Librarian

Flynn Carsen's got *nothing* on you. Combining academic genius with an extensive knowledge of ritual magic from the dawn of civilization and an abundance of wit and style, you give the image of the nerdy, introverted, and awkward librarian a much-needed glow up. Who says you gotta be tied to a desk in some boring, dusty-ass tomb of a building? Your resources are bleeding edge and just as versatile and vibrant as you are. Whether you run with a crew to chase down stolen artifacts and pilfered rituals or traverse the globe solo to acquire new texts for your collection, bidding at clandestine magical auctions in this plane and in the Unseen Worlds Beyond, people never have to ask if you belong there. They know exactly who you are.

The Griot

Everyone loves a good story, and you always seem to find the best ones — or maybe they find you. Either way, with them comes a vast store of knowledge, a wealth beyond measure: myths and legends, fables and folklore, the wisdom of the ages and of the Ancestors, even Auntie Eudora's famous rum punch recipe. You are a skilled raconteur and folks know that you're the one to call when sage advice from by-gone days is the only thing that will do. For some, the answers to life's biggest questions are to be found in the schools and libraries of the great Scholars. But you know that the genuine truths are more often found in tales told 'round campfires and kitchen tables, at the beauty shop, and — of course — at the cookout.

Blessings

The following are Ngoma traits for use in your chronicles.

Aid From the Ancestors (3 pt. Supernatural Merit)

Even amongst the Enlightened it is said that bargaining with denizens of the Unseen Worlds is a challenging and tricky business requiring formidable skills of persuasion, wit, and intimidation. You, however, encounter little difficulty in your dealings with the Unseen thanks to the Ancestors who negotiate on your behalf. So long as you maintain and nurture your connection to these ancient Enlightened souls, you can count upon their help to convince Otherworldly entities to agree to your terms of the bargains you set. Sometimes, if you seek their aid in advance, the Ancestors will do the messy job of haggling

for you, and on other occasions, all it takes to seal the deal is the presence of an Ancestor or two by your side to have the Unseen eating out of the palm of your hand. This Merit ensures that at least one Ancestor will appear to aid an Ngoma Mage when she attempts to summon and bargain with an Otherworldly entity or wraith. So long as the request for aid is explicitly included as part of the summoning ritual, the Scholar's difficulty in Spirit Bargaining is reduced by –2. When combined with Honor and Thanks, the difficulty for Spirit Bargaining may be reduced by an additional –1.

Honor and Thanks (Focus Item/Ritual)

The first lesson a *kuwaneko* learns — and some would say the most important one — is that an Ngoma Scholar's strength is measured by their connection to the Ancestors, those ancient and powerful kartek of Ki Khanga who have passed beyond the boundaries of the physical world to reside in the realms of the Unseen. To maintain that connection and to strengthen it, each Ngoma devises a simple, ritualized action or gesture to show the Ancestors that they are remembered, that their power is respected, and that the generosity of their aid and assistance is received with love and gratitude.

When performed as a quick, immediate action, this ritual allows the Scholar to lower the difficulty by -1 for any action using Spirit or Prime. Honor and Thanks may also be performed as a more elaborate and formalized ritual when an Ngoma wishes to ensure that she has the support of the Ancestors prior to any planned negotiations with Otherworldly beings. When performed as a more complex ritual over time or for a specific purpose like Spirit Bargaining, it is up to the Storyteller to decide how the Ancestors choose to reward the Scholar for their dedicated efforts.

Templar Knights

Knighthood lies above eternity; it doesn't live off fame, but rather deeds.

— Dejan Stojanovic, *The Sun Watches the Sun*

Of Grails and Grand Masters

1827

"I had a dream about you."

Aspirant Charlotte's eyes rose at the words. Grand Master Roland III often offered reassurance measured in discipline, an austere support. So when the non sequitur landed, shaded with a thoughtful tone very unlike her instructor of the past two years, it warranted special attention.

"Master?"

He turned from the tower window of Montsalvat's highest room, the commanding view of the Pyrenees glowing with moonlit snow and surrounding him like a nimbus. "It is nothing untoward, Aspirant. Merely provenance, assuming God does not speak through what we perceive as coincidence."

She dared a step closer. "Do you... mean God has spoken to you?"

"I would not claim limit to what God can do or accomplish, but I would not pronounce myself a prophet, either." He let the statement hang in the air, inviting her response with silence. He knew her well enough to entice curiosity, as the question answered held more weight than the lesson given.

"What did you dream?"

"I dreamt of your future, and what you must accomplish, both for yourself and the Order."

"And what did you see?"

Roland merely smiled, turning to the view of the mountains. "Focus your will, child. You have much yet to learn, and only so much time to learn it in."

1837

"Come with me!"

The metallic sounds of military preparation faded behind the closing wood panel that hid under Roland's office tapestry, leading down torch-lit steps to a secret vault Charlotte had never seen before. Everywhere, Templars gathered ancient treasures into traveling cases, though one stood by a pedestal, clearly a position he guarded as Roland awaited the chance to take the solitary object upon it: a chalice.

"Master..."

"No time." He opened another case, shattering a pane of glass within and withdrawing a simple ovoid stone. "This is perhaps the more fortunate treasure." He moved to the cup, holding the stone over its rim before pressing his thumbs into it with a crack. "A gift from an old friend among the Ahl-i-Batin. He promised it would unite all humanity in its belief in virtue." He tilted the stone, pouring a crimson fluid into the cup before lifting it, and presented it to her.

"It falls to you to fulfill that promise."

"I... Master, I cannot–"

"Charlotte, there is no time. Time, logic, fate, God Himself have led us here. Montsalvat will fall today, but you must survive. I've taught you; I hope well. I hope for the Order's future, and in that hope, I invest in you our greatest treasure."

"Is this... the Grail?"

He pressed it to her lips. "All cups are God's."

Today

Charlotte smiled as Schafa pulled back from the kiss. "You're smoking those cigars again, aren't you?"

Charlotte looked out over the view of the Pyrenees. "I never could fool you, my love."

"All is well. There should be no secrets between us, if they can be helped."

A knock at the door. Oliver Lyons opened it. "Grand Master, the one you have requested is here."

Shafa brushed at her hijab. "Then it is my cue to leave."

"I wish you might stay."

The Ahl-i-Batin smiled. "No, hubibi. You have your business and I have mine. The promised future is in those who inherit, yes?"

Charlotte turned back to the mountains, recalling her own Master standing in that very place. She regarded her hands and noted, for the first time in almost two centuries, a wrinkle. She smiled.

"It certainly is."

Born in the Blood of Pilgrim

The Knights of the Temple of Solomon wield the sword with the right hand of God. But we were not always known for our Orichalcum blades and crimson cloth. Once, we were the Poor Soldiers of Christ, led by our first Grand Master, Hugh de Payen. Founded in blood in 1119 AD, we swore a holy vow to protect those that could not protect themselves. Never would there be a raid again, like that of the Saracen, killing over 300 pilgrims of God and taking the remaining poor souls as prisoners. Our orders were that of poverty, obedience, and the art of being humble, forever bowing our heads, ready to sacrifice and receive our thorny end. We lived and breathed by the 600 articles of the Order of the Knights Templar bestowed upon us by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. We would stand up for the followers of the Holy Word and spread Truth, aiming our strategic forces towards the Apocalypse, ever preparing for the end of days, protecting the devotees of our Savior from the sin-blackened fingers of Hell itself.

By 1130, our fellowship had grown to over 300 members. The Pope himself gave us his blessing to build our own chapels, entrusting us with what methods we saw fit for the betterment of the Templars, down to confiscating and storing any riches we gained from our enemies. We were idolized and envied by the less fortunate; townspeople ushered their able-bodied young to our holy doorsteps. But like Babylon, the small cracks are what reduced us to inglorious rubble. And what sin is subtler than Pride?

When Jerusalem fell the Templars were viewed as heretics, unfairly accused of alliance to the Hashashin, painted of the very crimes we had sworn and suffered to stop. We tried to take back our honor, to take back Jerusalem. We failed. We did not understand at the time that going back to the life and practices of the "good old days" was not God's plan. And the refusal to stray away from our vanity for the sake of a self-described "purity" meant we would forever be on the lam, instead of openly among God's flock. Away from the accusations of heresy, sodomy, and devil worship we hid our members and our riches like thieves in the night. Those who were intercepted saw their treasures confiscated and their bodies tortured to the point of false confession and madness. We tried a different approach, attempting to be more studious and worldly. We adopted foreign customs practices, even learning Arabic, a considerable risk, seeing as that was the language of our supposed enemies. We were still willing to open our minds, as much as a "boys only society" could at the time.

Death by Fire

The more revealed and wealthy we became, the larger the target on our backs grew. Perhaps the sharpest marksman was Philip the Fair, King of France. He owed many debts to the Templars and, rather than settle his obligations, instead chose to conspire with Pope Clement V to plunder all of our riches, the better to feed his lust for power and gold. Sadly, our Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, was Phillip's prize captive. God's strength did not prevail that day, as Molay confessed after being tortured for an excruciating length of time to all accusations against him and his knightly followers. But in 1314, as the dark clouds of defeat rained upon Paris, as Molay's wrist were bound to the heretic pyre, he rescinded his confession, claiming that his only transgression was speaking untruths. And without a scream, a solemn pillar of fortitude and terrible faith, Molay proclaimed with his dying breath that he would see King Phillip and Clement judged at the gates of St. Peter. By seeming coincidence, King Phillip and Clement met their death the very same year they sentenced Molay to burn. But then, believing in God precludes coincidence, in my experience. Privately, Molay was warned by the Order of Pure Thought of his imminent passing and selected his successor before he was seized by Philip's men. The new Grand Master, Henri de Marquet, fled with a meager company of carefully chosen knights and what was left of the treasury to an obscure citadel, Montsalvat, in the Pyrenees. There, they took an oath to forever serve the Gabrielites, though whether for protection or guidance, no one can say.

Over a decade of silence later, we arose from the ashes of shame and fear and forced ourselves back into the view of the mystical community once again, whilst keeping our fortress undisclosed. We strengthened our numbers, drafting new soldiers to continue our mission. Granted, religion did continue to cause a divide, but with definitions of orthodoxy so malleable, we could no

longer fight heresy. Instead, we armed ourselves with the practice of the ancient arts of alchemy learned from the Artificers and expanded our understanding of the Divine Fire, what our erstwhile peers call "Magick," steering our focus to the applications of force, life, mind and prime. Through our mage-craft and knowledge of the Spheres — or, rather, the Earthly metaphysical emanations of God — we brought ourselves closer to our messiah.

The Order of Pure Thought

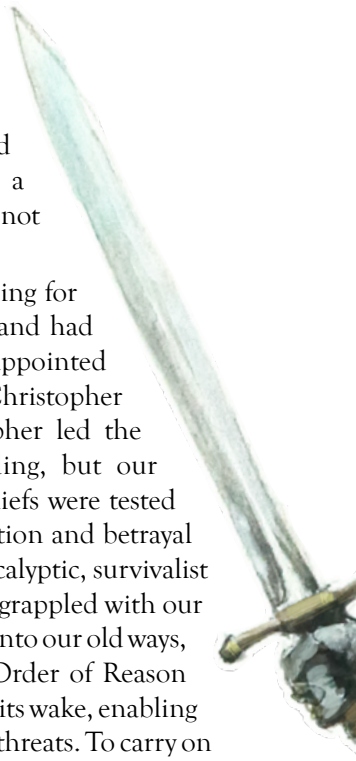
During the Reformation, our Order was forced to abandon the idea of a universal church, moving instead towards a somewhat grudging acceptance of members from all Christian denominations, so long as they held Christ in their hearts. Eventually we became a part of the Venetores and fought at the frontlines of the War of Ascension against the Traditions, soldiers leading the charge against horrific abuses of arcane power. The wizards and mystics believed in the manipulation of magick for their own personal gain. This is all during the time that mundanes, worldwide, believed us to be dead, while we continued to prosper underground. Or so we thought.

It was not long before a great wedge of pride and purity began to form within, a shard which would divide us. A good number of Templars found a way to transcend the "weakness" of the Christian faith, while the rest of the Order of Pure Thought started to view religion as a hindrance, preventing them from forming a unity with humanity, choosing instead the path of atheism. And I'm afraid, my dear, eager child, that it was only the beginning. We still had so much to learn of our faith and our belief system and where our understanding of God was incomplete.

In 1837 the Templars learned that the Order of Reason had decided to abandon religion completely. The Templars were to become brute enforcers, a scourge against faith wherever it was to be found. Our dependence upon the Gabrielites had, in their opinion, made us little more than tools, and our voices held no weight any longer, subsumed in the atheistic zeal of the Order's new vision for humanity. Their intentions would have made us into a mockery of everything the Templars were founded for, an unholy inversion of our divine purpose.

Renewed Faith

Outraged, we commenced preparations to battle the Order of Reason. We had intelligence that they intended to lay siege to Montsalvat, so once again we evacuated what relics and wealth we might, preserved by trusted Knight-Brothers who would survive to carry our membership forward should the castle fall. Prayers and provisions were laid in, and those brave Knights prepared for battle... only to be betrayed from within. The Order arrived earlier than estimated with a never-before-seen army of nightmarish proportions. A band of what are known today as Hyper Intelligent Technologies: hideous technomantic war machines sprung from twisted imaginations. We did not sway in the face of this development but charged on. Alas, ill-prepared for the alien machinery, and though the skill and faith of the Templars never wavered, traitors allowed the Order to gain entrance. Grand Master Roland III met his end in this Judas Edict, a staggering blow from which we would not recover for a long time.



Following our tradition of planning for the End of Days, Grand Master Roland had taken preventative measures and appointed a new Grand Master in advance: Christopher the Just. Once appointed, Christopher led the remaining survivors deep into hiding, but our struggles were far from over. Our beliefs were tested and altered, and the scars of persecution and betrayal eventually imposed on us a more apocalyptic, survivalist mentality. Through pain and fear we grappled with our religious roots. But the more we held onto our old ways, the stronger and more corrupt the Order of Reason grew, spreading atheism and doubt in its wake, enabling indifference to Hell and all its darkest threats. To carry on the path of Unity for Humanity, the Knights Templar swore all of its members to secrecy and initiated the building of a new Christendom, merging all of Humanity into an undivided force. Finally realizing that we could not bind our forces to one church, we sought to unify around one Faith: Faith in the innocent, Faith in goodness, Faith in ourselves and the power we could, through God's grace, forward our mission.

In the 2000s a fresh divide split the Temple. One side envisioned a far better future with the Disparate Alliance, strengthening our own cause by broadening our beliefs to more progressive ideals, such as the acceptance of women, among other genders and denominations. Which is how I came to be here, standing in front of you now. We forced the once exclusively male order to become one that embraced all of God's children. It only took a bloody century or three... but I digress. Unfortunately, there are a few remaining members still firmly aligned with the old ways committed to their own path of righteousness. Some have chosen exile, while others merely grumble and politic among

our ranks. We wish them well and pray for them daily. However, we must continue to stay vigilant in our methods of secrecy. This is to not to say that we have a motto of distrust, but our fellowship holds many divisive philosophies, and we have learned nothing if not caution with our courage. So keep a wary ear out for their misguided teachings, as they are waiting in the wings, looking for a chink in our armor. Perhaps they do not realize how much they risk our safety and success in their pursuit of outmoded orthodoxy, but we cannot spare them from our battlements, metaphorical as they may be. With time, we may yet see the next generation of Templars rise, as colorful as Joseph's coat, a cloak of brotherhood and safety in God's light, ready to lead the charge against the end of the world itself.

Speaking of the new generation, your guide is right on time. Brother Lyons, would you be so good as to show our newest recruit to their quarters, and perhaps enlighten them as to recent events? I'm afraid I have far too many appointments to keep, and God waits for no woman.

Welcome to the Knights Templar, child. We're going to save the world.

Days of Fire and Prophecy

Come along now. Where did she leave off? Ah, yes, the modern age.

The Order did not tear itself apart with political debate; we had survived annihilation far too many times to turn on each other. Instead, we came together, gathering our numbers and resources, presenting and debating our cases and perspectives. It was, likely, the most democratic era the Order has ever known. Regional Preceptors held open forums among Knight-Magi and Aspirants, alike, and though many of the surviving Marshalls were put forth as successors, none were seen as appropriate leadership material.

It was the presentation of Charlotte de la Roux as a worthy successor by Shafa Fakhoury, an Ahl-i-Batin who had assisted in the sheltering of many of our surviving members, which gave pause to all those convened. Yes, the same you were just speaking to. Charlotte was clearly favored by the Lord, possessing a mastery of the Divine Flame and known as a skilled leader, organizer, and warrior. She had never favored the title of Dove Knight, but many among their ranks looked to her as an example of what any woman could aspire to in any division or duty to the Order. Those who had been pushing for a departure from the Templars' patriarchal rules pressed for it, while others simply saw an excellent leader with a pedigree stretching back to the fall of Montsalvat. While a minority suspected she was involved in the Judas Edict, Charlotte insisted a strongbox in one of the Solomon vaults be opened, locked by Roland himself to only unseal when a secret word was spoken. Charlotte provided the word, and while only the Preceptors know exactly what was found within, whatever it was convinced them she was the rightful inheritor of the title Grand Master, dictated by Roland the Third for when there was no heir to take the mantle.

I know, there's a whiff of secrecy to it all. Some like to whisper of blackmail or some other deep-seated plot. Charlotte had not aged a day since the Technocracy's

betrayal, and only now have we seen some small signs of her many years on earth. Those who support her say God preserved her for the right time to take the reins of leadership. Others say she is a puppet of the Conventions, or even some long-awaited traitor held for the killing blow by the Ahl-i-Batin, but that's a long shot, at best. Frankly, we've seen far too much support from our Muslim allies to think this is a worthwhile effort, and the Technocracy has tried to exterminate us too many times not to have played this card earlier.

Our mandate is as it ever was, yet has grown in both responsibility and scope: to promote a True Christendom, to triumph against the infernal and the wicked, to safeguard pilgrims and the innocent whatever their beliefs, and to stamp out evil where we find it. The difference is that we believe God is immanent within the ethic, and while our own membership does require sharing the faith, the concept of judgement is left to the Lord. "There are many rooms in my Father's house," and is it not arrogance to presume the Word, ourselves? Aquinas' City on the Hill is not one of colonization, but cooperation with its neighbors, for the vantage is not one of superiority, but to provide security for all. We must be good neighbors, lest we become tyrants who wield the Word rather than follow it.

As a consequence, we don't go it alone anymore. The crucible of fire has burned away impurities and shown the real value of faith and friendship. Our allies in the Disparate Alliance are not who we might have sided with in the past, and we certainly keep our own secrets, as do they, but they have proven reliable, and there are, perhaps, some aspects of God's creation we may yet learn of through their eyes.

Our methodology has not changed, either: Where once we were the stalwart knights on the battlefield, we have become experts in espionage and sabotage, working behind the scenes with money and discretion more than overt force. Still, I find that only makes the battles we engage in all the more worthy. We choose the field and make sure situations are in our favor before moving in for the kill. We fight with honor but redefine retreat. It is not necessary to lay one's life down to make a statement when victory is by far the greater glory to Christendom, and where we may have once stood our ground reviling the thought of cowardice, we now see that a tactical repositioning can turn martyrdom into triumph.

That same survival mindset prevails among all Templars, and well it should after centuries of betrayals and evasion. Knights operate in cells, with only the leader holding the means to contact their superiors. Decentralized operations maintain the security of our Order and guard our secrets from capture. While our more... zealous rogue elements treat this much as a terrorist would, we have a structure akin to a city built for seige. We all answer to the Grand Master, but the chain of command has corridors and chokepoints, the capacity for self-sufficiency if cut off, and the means to root out spies. In this fashion, the Templars have survived over and over where others have fallen.

The world cannot any longer stand the luxury of prideful champions. We have retaken Montsalvat, and there are many other places of power yet to return to us. The Second Coming could be any day, and we must present a strong foundation for the Church to be rebuilt on. The foes against us are manifold: the Conventions, the Nephandi, the wicked among the nightkin, even mundane human corruption. We are the warriors of Christ, and through faith, courage, humility, and will, we will see the world saved for us all, no matter the form it takes.

Alphas and Omega

The Templars have survived. Still, it is folly to think God operates in a linear, three-dimentional framework. Chronomancy and multiversal exploration prove the necessity of faith, for our minds cannot fathom the infinite. Indeed, those same Arts have the possibility of changing what is and was, even now.

One instance is a juncture where we never left the side of the Technocracy. Faith becomes zealotry in unity. God, effectively, is in the machine, and we build Heaven right here with no doubt or remorse. Nomenclatures of Christianity become more a shorthand, like any Convention enjoys, and the Order holds to tradition as a point of pride and identity, faith in the tangible immediate over the promise of scripture and prophecy. A Technocracy ascendant means unifying faith in the Kingdom of God... even if God is not a cross, but an embodiment of universal technical miracles.

Our enmity with the Nephandi is legendary, for we see them as nothing less than the Antichrist itself. The Templars rise to the challenge in a world on fire. We have ever prepared ourselves for the Apocalypse, and our clandestine nature is as much an asset in such dark times as our faith. Ever mobile, our caches of loot and holy artifacts are opened for use, as there is no tomorrow but the one we earn by righteous fire. Hunted to the ends of the Earth, we take the fight to the jaws of the infernal masters, and there redeem mankind with our lifeblood, or fall to the last in the only battle worth waging.

In a world without the Disparate Alliance, the Templars are resigned to their continued isolation. In this, we have become as much Knights as archaeologists, uncovering the truths of the distant past to eliminate the mistakes and misinformation of millennia. A single mistranslation can change the words of prophecy, and from our secret strongholds we seek the trump card which must surely be waiting for us. For those with the means, a recovery pilgrimage to Doissetep holds the promise of artifacts long claimed by others, including the Choristers. Others remain earthbound, exploring lost temples for hidden truths and haunting museums and auction houses, in search of that which others have taken in the name of vanity. Our coffers empty, but our armories swell.

Believers and Heretics

Our history is peppered with betrayal and adversarial relationships with those who might better have served as allies. Adaptation is not straying from God's word, but better understanding it. The Templars of today survived because we have learned. Through tragedy and triumph, with our backs to the wall we've discovered who our friends and enemies truly are, and nothing teaches more effectively than disaster.

Our most obvious allies are the Chorus Celestial, at least from the outside. While we share more than a few philosophies with them, and they are often quick to offer friendship and, from their perspective, absolution, we tend to find them a little too like the missionaries of history, seeking to subsume rather than ally. Many of our number left for their ranks, some taking the hidden arts of Orichalcum smithing with them, and there is a certain hunger in their eyes when they speak with us. Perhaps they seek reconciliation, and I sincerely hope it can be found, but it will take respect on both sides before we can bridge the gulf.

Perhaps less obvious is our alliance with the Ahl-i-Batin. Historically, we shed one another's blood in the Crusades, but today we recognize them for their courage and conviction, and our historical understandings helped us discover how we each seek God in our own ways. Faith supports faith, and arguments about how best to do God's work means losing the meaning in the message. Among their number I've found friends and worthy comrades. Extend them your trust, for they have paid for it many times over.

Among our enemies, the easiest to understand are the Conventions. The Technocrats are committed to the

Devout Positions

Knight-Aspirant is sponsored by a Templar prepared to vouch for them. Once chosen, the Aspirant must fast and pray before attending the ceremony where they take a vow of blood and loyalty with their very soul. After kissing an ancient broadsword of the Templars and vowing their obedience to the order, their sponsor then presents the new aspirant as a Sir, Lady, or simply Knight, adorned in their new mantle, emblazoned with a bright red cross.

Knight-Brother/Sister or Kin is a newly sworn-in Knight. It is the lowest rank in the Knights Templar but the highest rank and honor of which many Knights outside of the Temple could ever strive or dream attain.

Preceptor is a guardian of the globally spread safehouses of the ever-growing numbers of the Knights Templar.

Dove Knight is a former lateral rank for aspiring non-male knights. It's mostly considered outdated, after the allowance of women and non-gender conforming individuals to advance to higher ranks, though some Dove Knights deliberately reclaim the term.

Marshal is the organizational leader of the Order. In smaller regions, a single Marshal is appointed. In larger nations, various districts are each appointed their own Marshal. Small adjoining countries may be grouped under one Marshal.

Seneschal is one of nine officers selected from the ranks of Marshals to form the esteemed advisory board of the Grand Master. In some cases, the Seneschals have more substantial positions with longstanding responsibilities, such as the Commander of Security, who oversees the Order's internal security, the Commander of Arms, who is in charge of executing marching orders and infiltrations, and the Commander of the Treasury, responsible for the most prized and notorious treasures of the Knights Templar.

Grand Master is the most superior and devout Knight, whose word is literal gospel. A lifelong dedication, each Grand Master must choose their successor before their divine inauguration. In only the most unusual or dire situation would a unanimous vote by all nine Seneschals remove a Grand Master from office.

Knight-Magus specifically means an awakened Templar and exists as title alongside rank.

destruction of faith itself, and our refusal to become their maltheist enforcers is what led to the division between us. In them lies the death of faith, and as much as we try to be open to other philosophies, we recognize in them both treachery and doom. Their world is a thing of static hatred, and through the souls of humankind, they mean to kill God. We will stop them.

The Nephandi, on the other hand, are our opposite number. They do not seek dominion like the Technocracy, but annihilation of all things. In them is the inversion of the free will God gives us, and if you must feel anything approaching compassion for them, let it be the mercy of a swift death. They would not offer you the same, and in them, alone, should we let God sort them out.

Somewhere beyond alliance and enmity are the Marauders. What others call magick we know as miracles, and so by that metric, the madness of their Quiet might be seen as connection to the divine Word. God's pattern follows their whims, and while we must be aware of the taint inherent in human interpretation, the scraps of Truth we might sort from them are worth the risk. Prophecy may lurk within, and in their madness lies opportunity. If you need any proof of the value in that, you need only ask the Grand Master.

In fact, I'm about to seek one such mad prophet. With your Captain's permission, perhaps you would care to accompany me? We're about God's work, and with Their grace, we may just see the world saved. There's no better time to seize tomorrow than today.

Character and Traits

The Templar are far more diverse than the phrase "soldiers of Christ" might suggest, and their membership and tricks are often a surprise to those who expect fundamentalist warriors.

Concepts

These stalwart Templars make great player or Storyteller characters.

A Perfect Knight

You never were one for looking back, but the concepts of the past always held the appeal of a half-finished masterpiece. The old guard like to talk about the good old days, as though there was ever a time after the Garden that was good. Of course, they're hearkening back to when the Templar were a boys only club swinging swords at brown people. They may frown on a woman like you holding the title of Knight, but you know your own potential. You have courage, cunning, faith, and know how to battle 21st century opponents on their own terms. The point of your journey is as much about proving what a knight can be as it is about showing who can be one.

The Money

Your mother taught you the fine art of finance from a young age, showing you the power over prosperity that could be wielded with a handshake and a signature. The day she showed you the hidden treasures of Solomon, you felt your heart swell with pride. You carry forth her legacy as a Templar banker, though your work often involves keystrokes rather than penstrokes. Your sword is a list of numbered accounts, your shield a series of shell corporations. Your fellow Knights may think you're little more than a glorified quartermaster, but you're in the field more often than the office. Nothing shows good faith like facetime, and you are quite aware that between tyrannical Technocrats and literally bloodsucking brokers, knowing

Templars and Primium

No other faction than the Technocracy has access to Primium. This is, at least, technically correct — the Templars call it Orichalcum. The Templars still possess some magical blades forged during their alliance with the Order of Reason, but many of these have been lost over the years. While some transmuters consider Orichalcum "True Gold," the Templars have been tinkering with the classic recipe since the 1300s, combining faith and Ahl-i-Batin alchemy to smelt their own form of magical alloy. While the Templars lacks the technomantic know-how (or desire) to design cybernetic augments, and every work has exorbitant costs, their artisans have created some of the finest classic arms in history.

Orichalcum in its dormant form retains the same silvery-golden sheen as Primium, but when it activates, veins of crimson light spread across its surface. Some Templars refer to this as Christ's Blood, and while no other group has such extensive access to Orichalcum tools, some Templars who joined the Choristers took the secret with them. Only time can tell how it may develop in their hands. For the sake of mechanics, Orichalcum and Primium follow the same rules: The differences are purely cosmetic and thematic.

your way around combat prayers and dragonsbreath shells is an investment in success.

A Light in the Dark

The world is withering, yet this is not a reflection of God's plan. Rather, it is the failure of Her custodians. The devil's work grinds away faith, and with it, miracles. You recognize that it's going to take more than war and money to save the world: It takes ministry. At times, this means diplomacy with other factions, a rational head which can keep allies, Disparate and otherwise, united in common goals. In others, you fulfill the emotional needs of the Knights as confessor and counselor. Morale is in short supply, and your flock shall not want so long as you draw breath. After all, in faith there is hope, and hope is the light which can hold back any darkness.

Blessings and Gifts

God does not send Her servants into the fray unarmed.

Instruments

The modern Knight on the go prefers portable fare, especially bibles, hymnals, and crosses which any mundane might explicably carry in public. For a more extraordinary-but-plausible touch, the accoutrement and implements of clergy see use, such as a thurible on monstrance. Swords, particularly of Orichalcum make, require special efforts to transport through public or secure spaces, but their practical use and symbolic meaning make them all-time favorites.

Paradigms

A World of Gods and Monsters has been the reality for the Templar since the first of them felt the Divine Flame, but Might Is Right has been their downfall. Divine Order and Earthly Chaos are the order of the day, but the dual faith in deliverance of the world juxtaposed with a centuries-long history of betrayal and persecution in preparation for an apocalyptic last stand for God has led most modern Templar to embrace the extremes of It's All Good — Have Faith and One-Way Trip to Oblivion. Both are united in their quest; it's simply a question of whether they look to the future with optimistic fervor or fatalistic dedication.

Orichalcum Blade (Background Cost: 1–5 pts.)

Unlike the countermagickal cybernetics of their sworn enemies, the Knights' forgemasters craft blades and armor of surpassing workmanship, capable of doing aggravated damage to shapechangers and the undead as well as serving host to other enchantments. While it is possible to lose such gear, it is also possible to share it with teammates or leave it behind if the situation demands. While many Templars would sooner die than relinquish their blades, there are times when a sword is simply impractical.

Vatican Connections (background 1–5)

While the Templars have embraced a far more flexible interpretation of the faith than the new Inquisition

prefers, members of the faith still hold valuable inroads with Vatican powers. Much like Contacts but far more specialized, each dot can be used to call upon the ranks of the Holy See, from administrative assistance from the local Diocese to combat backup from a Society of Leopold strike team. These favors often come with strings attached, and failure to reciprocate can have negative repercussions, especially if a Knight-Magus reveals themselves to have supernatural abilities of their own.

Knight-Captain (background cost 1-5, optionally 2-10, see below)

The Templars are not a monolithic organization of miracle-workers, but a coalition of well-trained warriors. As a Knight-Captain, you can call upon a squad of these Retainers to assist you in your varied quests on behalf of the Order. This team can either be a temporary assignment or one that is often assigned to the Knight-Captain, resulting in a deeper relationship with the members. Your team does not include any Awakened members, but instead represent a staff of up to five soldiers (one per dot) who are equipped to handle more mundane operations, usually a single missio type such as assault, security, surveillance, etc. For each team member you pay two dots for, that member has True Faith.

Solomon Codes (1-2 pt. Resources Merit)

The early brothers of the Order established banks of surpassing profit, generating riches which have lasted to this day. While the Bankers who act as caretakers of the Temple's treasure hoards are the primary custodians of the varied offshore accounts which house the new digital wealth the Order commands, some worthy members are entrusted with access to a small portion for operational use. Every dot of Solomon Codes gives access to two dots of Resources at the liquidation level in hard currency. These funds are only to be used on Templar missions, and self-serving use not only leads to their withdrawal, but discipline up to expulsion from the Order. Greed is a sin.

the taftani

You stay in wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.

— Morpheus, *The Matrix*

Curiosity is Magickal

Decades have passed since Saahira's been to Yazd. She left in another century, in what feels like another world, after she bested her master. Her journeys took her far away, but now that it's time to pass on what she knows, she's followed the pull towards home.

The operatives followed her. Of course they did. This city is firmly in the Technocrats' hands, and they don't take kindly to any Reality Deviants running around, especially not Weavers. A girl of twelve or thirteen slipped a note under her hotel room door to let her know they were tailing her. The girl's been tailing her, too, but Saahira's just fine with that. It's long past time for her to pass along what she knows of magick. She came home seeking a worthy student; perhaps she already found her.

She leads them — operatives and curious young girl alike — on a good long meander while she gets her bearings. It's changed so much since last she was here. Once a small town, now a bustling city, all wired and buzzing and connected. There's a city far beneath their feet, too. Saahira can feel it there, buried and forgotten. Her hands are strong from throwing clay. Her fingers are deft from years of weaving. She could raise the city with a flick of her wrist, if she wanted, drag some truth out into the open.

But she'd pay a price if she did, and while Saahira's not afraid of a little Paradox, there's the girl to think about. Saahira and the operatives have defenses; the girl doesn't.

She lets the operatives corner her. They're clearly not from around here: skin pink with sunburn, sweat breaking out on their brows and darkening their suits, which are entirely the wrong fabric for the season. You'd think they'd at least try blending in, but that's the Technocracy's way, isn't it — to force everyone else to bend to them?

She clenches her fist in a spark of anger. Maybe one pillar, she thinks, and then her hands are in motion. They mistake her upturned palms for surrender and start moving toward her. But the ground rumbles beneath their feet, and the ancient stone pillar shoots from the cracked earth, carrying them fifty feet into the air atop it. They could clamber down, and Saahira could let the battle begin in earnest, but that's not what she's here for. She needs to keep them up there awhile.

"Simoom," she whispers, and at first she's not sure her old friend will answer. Then the wind —the Simoom, the first spirit she learned to call — comes howling along the street, and a hot gust caresses her cheek before the spirit follows where she's pointing. The operatives cry out as the same wind that holds them atop the pillar buffets and batters them.

Saahira turns to where the girl peeks from a doorway, cell phone pointed at the mage and the pillar. She's filmed the whole thing. Saahira approaches her, hand outstretched. The girl eyes it warily, then makes her choice. Instead of relinquishing the phone, she slips her hand into Saahira's.

The old Weaver chuckles. "Good," she says. Let the world see what magick is. "Bring me to your parents. We should discuss your apprenticeship."

Threads of the Past

I know, I know. Outside, the wind is rising, and you can't help but keep one ear cocked to listen to it. A smart apprentice is always alert — is it just the wind, or did an enemy send it? Or perhaps it's an ally instead, a spirit bearing a message we ought to heed? Remember that. Keep up that vigilance. For now, trust that I've heard it too, and judged it an old friend. Now, a lesson.

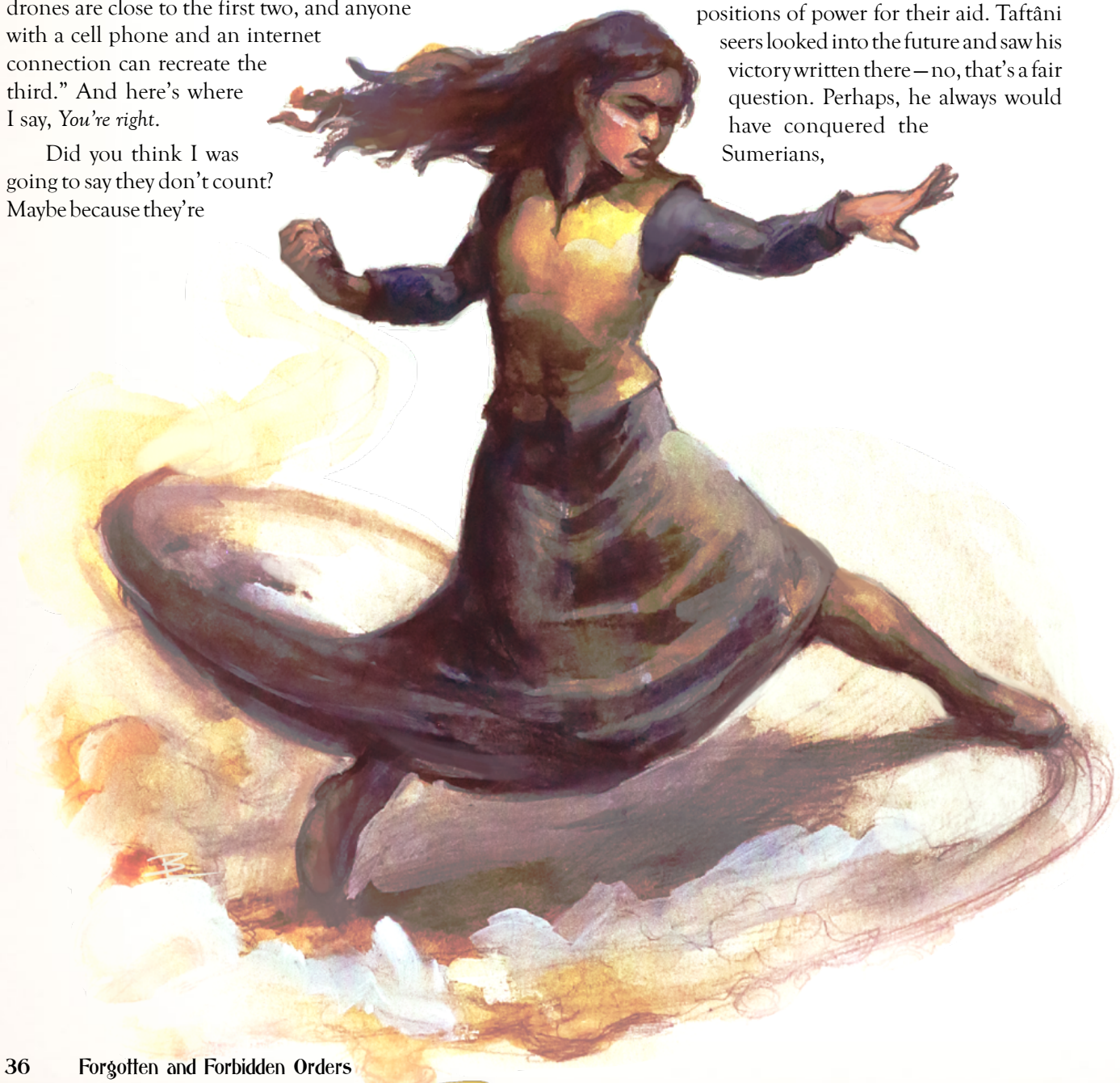
When the first words were spoken, we Taftâni were there. We wove Asha — Truth — into our words and works, and with them shaped the world. As the first civilizations formed in the lands between the rivers, we were the viziers and seers guiding rulers toward wisdom. Some will tell you that magick was easier in those days and that the wonders we accomplished are remnants of the past. They fail to realize it's all still possible today, if only they'd make an effort.

But, yes, in ancient times, cities floated above the clouds. Weapons fought independently of human hands. Seers peered into clear glass and discerned what was happening far away. I see your smirk. You're thinking, "We have those things today, for good or for ill: skyscrapers and drones are close to the first two, and anyone with a cell phone and an internet connection can recreate the third." And here's where I say, *You're right*.

Did you think I was going to say they don't count? Maybe because they're Technocratic inventions? A few decades ago, I might have agreed with you, but things have changed. The world has changed, and the Weavers with it. Now hush and let me tell you how.

For a thousand years, we studied. We iterated. By weaving Asha alongside every thread on the loom, by hammering it into the metal or sculpting it into the clay, our handiworks were useful, beautiful, and capable of so much more than their mundane counterparts. We conversed with spirits and the djinn: Some we made our servants, some our allies, and some our enemies.

In 2300 BCE, Sargon of Akkad called mages from far and wide to his city and offered them positions of power for their aid. Taftâni seers looked into the future and saw his victory written there — no, that's a fair question. Perhaps, he always would have conquered the Sumerians,



or perhaps the seers took what was merely possible and made it inevitable. Either way, with their help it was done swiftly, and soon Sargon ruled all of Mesopotamia. Every court boasted a wizard or vizier, and magick flourished. Whatever a magus could imagine, she could create. We shaped reality much the way a potter coaxes form from clay.

Still, Sargon's conquest marked the beginning of a deepening wedge between the Taftâni and the djinn. It took nearly a millennium and a half, but eventually, the wedge became a rift. 945 BCE saw the beginning of the 10,000 Djinn Plague. The spirits cut off cities from their vital water supplies. Through their illusions, caravans diverged from the trade roads and lost themselves in the desert. Djinn razed cities and harried mortals. They barred humans from lands they declared their own or demanded impossibly steep payments from those who requested passage.

The work of the Hebrew king, Solomon the Wise — a formidable magician himself — gave the Taftâni the means to turn the tide of the war. In 966 BCE, Solomon had founded the city of Palmyra, which swiftly became a center of magic and trade between the empires of Persia and Rome. He'd spent years studying not only the nature of spirits, but also their behaviors and limitations. Most spirits, he believed, were able only to perform duties according to their nature. They were bound by laws which they neither understood nor, frequently, perceived. Still, those laws compelled and informed their actions. Solomon compiled these observations into what became known as the Solomonic Code. By learning these laws, the Taftâni were able to subdue the djinn and end the war.

The Warp Changes

As the following centuries of trade and exploration brought other cultures — and thus, other paradigms — into the Middle East, we came into contact with mages from other orders. We shared territory with the Ahl-i-Batin; though our ideologies were vastly different, we avoided one another more than we clashed. It was the Hermetic orders who posed the truest threat, and by 160 CE, though our viziers fought to preserve our influence over Palmyra, the Romans had largely taken over, bolstered by Hermetic mages. In 267, Queen Zenobia managed to not only retake the city but expand her empire farther, annexing lands as far as Egypt. Her reign was short-lived. Her armies made the Romans bleed, but ultimately they recaptured Palmyra, and Zenobia — last of the Taftâni to sit on a throne — was exiled to Rome for the remainder of her days.

Do not mistake me — it's good that the world got bigger. We learned from other mages, and they from us.

Petra

The Nabateans — a Bedouin tribe who fiercely defended their independence — founded the city of Petra in around 400 BCE. For centuries, it was favored by the Kahin. There, the seers practiced divination for those who passed through. Like many of the Weavers' strongholds, their influence over it waxed and waned as it changed hands between Roman and Persian rule. Christians took the city in 297 CE, though they later abandoned it and deemed it haunted. Others held Petra, including an ancient vampire who made it his lair. At the turn of the 21st century, however, the Taftâni drove him out, and now control the city once more.

But, where we wished to reveal the truth through our magick, others, like the Hermetics and the willworkers of the Collegium Praecepti, wanted to control it. They'll tell you we were nearly destroyed, that between our duels and our ambitious magicks, the Taftâni dwindled to near-extinction. In truth, we retreated to the deserts and the mountains, some of us joining Bedouin tribes, others making our homes in places even the most intrepid explorers didn't dare to tread. Unwilling to compromise who we were, or dull our workings for others' assuagement, we withdrew. There, in the wild places, we could practice our magick without disruption or limitation. Weavers crafted sprawling palaces in high mountain passes; visitors who braved the peaks found luxurious accommodations awaiting them. Others traveled the Empty Quarter, performing deeds that would stop the Artificers' hearts to witness, and protecting caravans and settlements from the djinn and other dangers. What a feat, that we were more subtle than the Subtle Ones for so long!

You have a question about the Subtle Ones. I can see it in the twist of your mouth. Go on, ask it.

No, we are not enemies, though we've often clashed. We're not *friends*, either, and only rarely do we willingly keep one anothers' company. We disagree on some — but not all — matters of faith. Our penchant for drawing attention with our workings stymies their efforts to operate in the shadows; Taftâni and Batini make terrible partners on method alone. I won't deny that there's old enmity between our Crafts; for centuries, much blood was spilled over the countries we both consider our homes. When given the choice, we leave one another alone.

But that doesn't mean we can never work together. In 631 CE, the Taftâni joined with Ahl-i-Batin mages

to defeat the last of the Devil Kings. The battle lasted for weeks, and their magicks were welcome. We pulled lightning from the sky and smoothed swathes of the desert to glass with its heat to destroy the Oasis of Eternal Bliss. It would be more than a thousand years before we'd join forces on such a large scale again.

Though the Middle East is where most Weavers established their strongholds, it's not the only place we can be found. The world was full of wild places, and we were drawn to them. Taftâni viziers traveled the Silk Road to Asia and established themselves in several countries' courts. We did the same throughout northern Africa. Our warriors fought in the Crusades and settled in southern Spain. Apprentices sailed with expeditions crossing the Atlantic — the open sea is as untamed as the desert.

We weren't entirely beneath other mages' notice. When the invitation came to attend the Grand Convocation, some Taftâni accepted, traveling to the newly-formed Horizon to see what our counterparts proposed. To our disappointment and dismay, they sought not to push back against the Order of Reason, but to capitulate to it. *Be subtle in your Arts, lest others know you for what you are*, their protocols said. How could we ever agree to such a rule, when it would mean hiding the truth instead of spreading it? Rather than betray ourselves and relinquish our freedom, we walked away.

Retreat and Re-emergence

As the Order of Reason's influence expanded, we pushed back where we could. But the Scourge gave way to Paradox, and even in cities we'd once ruled, magick became dangerous. We are and have always been more solitary than most other Crafts and Traditions. Masters and apprentices protected one another from Technocratic threats, but otherwise we came together only rarely. Each Weaver was on her own. For thousands of years, we'd dueled one another to prove the strength of our Will. Mistakes were deadly because our opponents were formidable, and if you challenged another mage, you ought to be confident you could withstand their attacks. Now, it was reality itself that presented a threat.

The first World War brought even more Technocrats into the Middle East. Their paradigm became cloying. Inevitable. Our losses were steep, and our numbers once more dwindled.

But we never died out.

In 1978, Weavers in Afghanistan rallied together with Sleeper factions to help drive out heavily Technocratic Soviet and American forces. Their abundant use of vulgar magick changed the paradigm in the country entirely. For a time, it was neither Mystic nor Techocratic, but something wild and destructive. At the mages' commands, djinn wrought havoc in enemy military bases. Equipment was rendered useless and communications cut off. Effects that would have been vulgar anywhere else were coincidental. It took over a decade, but in 1991, the Soviets and Americans withdrew, leaving Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban.

While the Taftâni initially found common cause with the Taliban, both pushing back against Westernization, the years since have opened our eyes to the group's extremist views. We've distanced ourselves from the Taliban's treatment of women and other marginalized people. While we still operate in and fight for Afghanistan and its people, the Weavers do so on our own terms.

In more recent years, the Taftâni have reemerged into the world. We've always been here. We've never gone away, despite what the Traditions and Technocracy believed. As satellite technology improved and both countries and companies have littered the skies with more and more precise cameras, even the most remote places were no longer safe from prying eyes. If the Technocracy saw something they wanted, no matter how hard it was to get to, they came screaming in to claim it.

And since the Traditions sure as hell aren't going to come to our aid, we thought, *perhaps it is time to fight back ourselves*. Since its founding, Dubai had grown from a small fishing village to a major port thanks to its location on several trade routes. In the 1970s, the oil industry made it even more essential. With the turn of the 21st century, Dubai expanded rapidly into a center of technology, travel, and commerce—a sudden growth many attributed to Syndicate influence. Except, this wasn't the Financiers' handiwork, but the Weavers'. Dubai is a city of wonder and Art, and we're ready for the world to see the truth once more.

Out of the Wilds

Look out the window. Hold onto something if you must; there's no shame in it. This height even makes me dizzy sometimes and I've been living here for over a decade. See how the world spreads out below us, this beautiful city and the sea beyond. I wonder if those early Weavers felt the same thrill when they stepped out in their floating cities and saw the sun setting on the desert below. I think they must have.

It's no longer a disadvantage to be scattered across the world. We were content with our relative isolation, but it still left even our strongest mages vulnerable if they

were discovered. Spirit messengers and finely-crafted crystal balls kept us connected once, but now we merely need to pick up a phone to discuss philosophical matters with our peers. Our youngest members post their feats on social media, leaving the Sleepers to debate whether what they see is real or a trick of the camera.

That, by the way, is an excellent recruitment tool. Once, we mostly took apprentices from the villages near where we lived. We kept an eye out for those who displayed artistic aptitude. Parents ushered their gifted children before us, and we peered ahead to see if they were worthy of our tutelage. Now, potential apprentices might send a private message after seeing a video of a Weaver reciting poetry. Or a master might happen on an artist's online portfolio and reach out. From there, the training continues in person, but our pool of new candidates is far greater than it was long ago.

The Taftâni get our nickname — Weavers — from our beginnings as craftspeople. The items we created were not only beautiful, but also were *useful*. We imbued truth into our creations, but even if it was beyond the beholder's understanding, a jug still carried water; a rug still provided comfort. Many of us were and are polymaths. Living in harsh or remote places means learning many different skills to survive. We can repair worn pots, mend tears in our clothing, weave warm blankets, fit saddles, and more. If the pots can boil their own water, or the saddles don't always require a horse beneath them, so much the better. Here in the era of online shopping, it's that much easier to connect Sleepers to the truth.

Wealthy Westerners scramble to purchase authentic items created by indigenous makers. Taftâni help facilitate those transactions, setting up websites where the people we live among can sell their wares. If a few of our own creations are listed, perhaps the purchaser gets a helping of enlightenment as well. I see the furrow in your brow, and I understand. If capitalism's a tool of the Technocracy, should we be helping to perpetuate it?

I have no easy answer for you, but I'll tell you this: Even we can be subtle, sometimes. We can work within their paradigm to dismantle it. Comfort and hospitality are the greatest goods — we want those things not only for our mages, but all humankind. People should thrive. Hardship may make you appreciate what you don't have, but it's all too easy to romanticize poverty and scarcity. Children have a hard time learning when their bellies are empty. How can someone listen for the truths woven into a poet's words when her mind is clamoring with worry? *How will I pay my rent? How will I put food on the table? The car needs new tires. The children need new clothes.* It drowns out everything else. Until the Syndicate no longer has a strangle-hold on the world's economies, we're going to have to get creative, and it's not all through under-the-radar online shops.

What they value, we're learning to control. Here we are in Dubai, in glass-and-steel towers, with our fingers on the pulse of the markets. We're using the instruments of the Technocracy against them. There's an app for everything, and the average Sleeper can't tell if there's a spirit bound to your phone working miracles, or if it's a few hundred lines of code doing the same. Oh, your car can drive itself? Is that science, or is it magick? Now our youngest members are going viral with their social media duets, layering truth upon truth with each iteration.

Would that we could simply perform our great feats of magick and show the world what's possible. Some of the Zaotar itch to do just that. But being obvious draws attention, and both Technocracy and Traditions are peering at the Taftâni resurgence with interest, when they clue in to our presence at all. We have to be careful, but we won't go back to being entirely invisible. In the meantime, we chip away at the Syndicate's control of money and resources. Djinn under our command sabotage NWO spy satellites, helping to keep hidden those places that are most sacred and secret. Code is language, and Kahin programmers design and maintain our own sector of the Digital Web.

Part of the reason for our caution is out of respect for the company we keep. When the Disparate Alliance first came to us with their offer to join, we almost refused, and not only because the Batini were already part of it. (Though that consideration certainly gave us pause. The Subtle Ones did originally sign on with the Traditions, after all, and look how that turned out.) But the truth is, there's safety in numbers, which is a thing we Taftâni never really had. Being so insular nearly killed us more than once; we had to admit that being part of something bigger might be another change worth embracing.

For hundreds of years, our enemies underestimated us. They considered us gone and forgotten, which gives us a bit of an edge in the modern world. No one expects us to be a factor at all, let alone a formidable one. "True," isn't always "nice," remember — often, it hurts to hear. But what the Traditions and Technocracy call vulgar, we call *vital*, and we're ready to fight for a better world.

Come away from the window for now. Perhaps next time, we'll have our lesson in the sky.

Factions

The Taftâni have no formal hierarchy. Over the centuries, we've gathered together twice a year in bagha — gardens — to discuss matters of import, to brag about our accomplishments or those of our apprentices, and to test ourselves against our peers. In recent years, we've grown a little more formal, meeting more frequently and granting some of our respected elders the power to represent us with other members of the Alliance. Currently, Alima Jalat holds the position. She deftly navigates the concerns our Disparate siblings raise regarding some Weavers' penchant for blatancy, while holding firm on our autonomy.

As few as the Taftâni are, we still divide ourselves into two main factions. The **Zaotar** are warriors for magick and truth. Often, it's these mages outsiders picture when they describe us. Zaotar tend toward flashier displays of magick. Skilled in Forces, Prime, and Spirit, in battle they'll unleash lightning from a bottle, or call it down from a clear blue sky. They have a reputation for dueling at the drop of a hat, but most Zaotar fight for a reason. They're idealists, taking a stand against Consensus by working magick Sleepers can't ignore or explain away, nudging them ever closer toward the truth.

The **Kahin** are poets, soothsayers, and diviners. They rely heavily on Entropy, Mind, and Time to determine what lies ahead. Though there are fewer Kahin, they tend to live longer than their Zaotar counterparts. As they grow older, their studies lead them to seek greater and greater truths, and sometimes their study of fate leads them to neglect those spirits under their command. Kahin believe that mysteries beget power. They wield words like weapons, doling out blessings and curses, and ending fights with a whisper of poetry.

A World Not Yet Woven

The Taftâni seek a return to the early days of magick, when we could work wonders without limitations. As solid as the Technocracy's hold over Reality feels, some of our mages insist there's hope of lessening — or even outright eliminating — the threat of Paradox in the world by performing a massive working. The Kahin speak in possibilities, some declaring our impending triumph, others warning of disasters yet to come:

If the Taftâni succeed, the working, witnessed by millions of Sleepers across the globe, drives a wedge into the dominant paradigm. Though it doesn't affect the whole world, it's a strong start, making once-vulgar magick coincidental in Taftâni strongholds. Thousands of Enlightened mages die in the backlash.

The Weavers' reach may yet exceed their grasp. Cautious Kahin warn that the world is too far gone to bring back the days before Paradox reigned. They've seen a future in which the working goes a step too far, destroying all who participate in it, and strengthening Consensus in the areas where it is attempted.

Strong Knots and Fraying Threads

Ahl-i-Batin

History has often pitted us against one another, an enmity we're working to set aside. We can't go forward without helping one another, but it's hard to move on when your allies look upon you with disdain. We're too loud for the Subtle Ones, too bold, too much. Their fight against the Nephandi is vital, but we can't help but wonder what strides they'd make if they unleashed their potential.

Sisters of Hippolyta

Many of the other Crafts did the same as us, making themselves invisible and letting the world forget them in order to survive. We understand the Hippolytoi's wariness when it comes to fighting the Ascension War, even if we disagree with it. Let us be the trailblazers, then, drawing our enemies' attention so they can emerge safely. Some of their newer members are eager to face the dangers head on — we would do well to combine our efforts.

The Order of Hermes

The Hermetic Houses boast about their long histories, but most of them are children compared to us. The Council of Nine earned our disdain six hundred years ago when they accepted the Technocractic paradigm as inevitable, rather than rail against it. Paradox hurts? So fucking what. We all eat a little dirt before we die. Walk it off. Hermetic mages marched with Roman legions, reducing our numbers and our influence drastically. Yet, when the Order of Reason declared war on them several centuries later, they yielded too easily and we all paid the price.

Society of Ether

Scientists who dare to dream. It takes courage to break away from what's comfortable to stand up for your convictions, which they did when they left the Order of Reason. We may not trust them, but they're the most likely of the Traditions to look on our works with wonder rather than trepidation.

The Technocratic Union

The opposite of Asha is Druj: falsehood. The Technocrats are steeped in it, and push Sleepers toward

it, telling them the magick they witness isn't real, making them doubt their own potential. For too long, they've controlled the narrative. But even the tightest weaving can be unraveled, and we're masters of our craft.

Marauders

Some other mages see little distinction between our wild magicks and the workings of the Mad. We may even admire some of their reality-bending feats from time to time. However, we keep a tight control on ourselves and our willworking. You don't learn how to make something exquisite without years of practice and discipline. What appears wild and impulsive to others is the culmination of a lifetime's study. With the Mad, however, their lack of the same means the clay goes spinning off the wheel, the thread unravels on the loom, and bystanders get hurt.

Character and Traits

Below are examples of Taftâni who might appear in your game.

Concepts

While their numbers are relatively few, the Weavers are starting to grow again. Many operate in remote areas to avoid deadly backlash, but those apprentices who were raised among modern technology see ways to work with it and around it. They establish themselves in cities, ready to push back against the Technocratic paradigm.

Kahin Sage

You've spent most of your life deep in the desert, commanding spirits and keeping unruly djinn from harming the Sleepers under your protection. There, you worked your magick with little worry for who might see, or whether their disbelief would cause you trouble. When you attended that bagha and learned some Weavers had decided to change with the times, you understood the portents you'd been reading for months. Excited and a little afraid, you left the wild places behind, eager to spread the truth to a new generation. Though you haven't yet found an apprentice of your own, you've taken several younger Taftâni under your wing, offering them guidance and advice.

Star of the Socials

You exceeded your master's highest hopes, besting her when you were all of 19. You set off into the world, recording your travels and posting them online. What started out as a small following grew quickly, as you visited places long forgotten. Your fans argue in the comments, trying to understand some of the impossible footage they've seen. You're always on the move — you're pretty sure a handful of your followers are NWO operatives who'd like to ask you some questions. So far you've managed to stay a step ahead of them, relying on spirits, divination, and the ability to crash on the couches of those fans you've vetted and trust.

Zaotar Fighter

You protect the people whom governments fail. You might be a bodyguard, escorting victims of domestic violence to doctors' appointments and court dates. You might be a protester, putting your body between the police with their pepper spray and LRAD devices and the vulnerable; you can take the hits. Maybe you're in the crowd preventing ICE agents from getting to the courthouse steps, or you're the person who laid their body down in front of the bus so it can't move. You hope things remain peaceful. You hope no one throws a punch, or a rock, but if they do, you're ready. They might not see the assortment of glass bottles at your waist, but they'll feel the effects when you uncork them.

Merits and Flaws

The Merits, Flaws, and Rotes here are particular to the Taftâni, who've spent millennia working their magick in front of Sleepers. Though the heavily Technocratic paradigm can complicate their practices, the Weavers have never admitted defeat.

Paradox Mitigation (3 pt. Supernatural Merit)

Your will is strong enough to withstand the backlash that comes from performing vulgar magick. Whether you've built up a resistance through years of discipline, or the wild, remote region you call home sticks with you even in the middle of a modern city, Paradox doesn't affect you the way it does other mages. The first vulgar spell your character casts in a scene generates no Paradox. Additionally, during rolls for backlash (**M20**, p. 549), the Taftâni doesn't begin to acquire Paradox Flaws until one level higher than normal. For example, at 1–5 successes, the character suffers bashing damage as usual, but receives no Paradox Flaw. At 6–10 successes, she'd receive a trivial Paradox Flaw, at 11–15, a minor one, and so on.

Djinn Expertise (3 pt. Supernatural Merit)

From the beginning of their apprenticeship, the Taftâni learn the ways of the djinn. This includes their penchant for trickery and twisting words, which has been the downfall of many arrogant mages. When dealing with one of the djinn, the player adds 1 die to any Manipulation or Perception rolls.

Storytellers should consider that, while the characters are well-versed in crafting their commands to prevent the djinn from finding loopholes, players likely aren't. For a lower-ranking djinn, ask the player to describe their intent, and treat that as the order the spirit follows. Higher-ranking djinn might be more powerful or clever and therefore find wiggle room, but in general, remember that this is what the Taftâni excel at, and proceed accordingly.

Obvious Resonance (2 pt. Supernatural Flaw)

Magick has left its mark on you. While Sleepers might not notice anything unusual, your passage leaves a mark visible to anyone who knows what to look for... and they can follow it straight to you. Whenever you cast a vulgar spell, your resonance fills the area and hangs on the air for a number of days equal to your Arete rating. The Difficulty on rolls to track the character is reduced by one.

Djinn Bottle (Focus Item)

The process of creating a djinn bottle is a closely-guarded Taftâni secret, often only granted to an apprentice at the end of their training. While they may appear to be mere glass bottles with intricate etchings, they've been magickally reinforced, rendering them hard to destroy. Other vessels can serve to hold a djinni as well: rings, amulets, lamps, and so on. Solomon's seal binds the spirit into the vessel, and once bound, they must carry out the vessel owner's commands. (For more on the djinn, see **M20: Gods and Monsters**, p. 131-133.)

Rotes

Devouring Gullet of Flame

(Forces • • • •, Prime • •)

The Weaver removes a ring from her finger and tosses it toward her target. When she speaks a keyword, the ring expands into a spinning tunnel of flame. The vortex draws victims in hungrily, burning all who are caught within.

System: Forces and Prime create the tunnel, while Forces changes the gravity in the area to pull the target close. The target may roll Dexterity + Athletics, Difficulty 7, against the mage's successes on their Arete roll to attempt to escape the tunnel. This effect is vulgar.

Groundswell

(Forces • • •, Matter • • •)

With a gesture, the mage commands the earth beneath her target's feet. A chasm opens beneath him, or jagged rocks erupt from a previously smooth road. If there are structures below, the Weaver may pull them up to the surface, revealing them to the world.

System: Matter allows the mage to sense and manipulate materials, while Forces shifts them at her command. Targets caught within the Effect suffer falling or ramming damage as appropriate. This effect is vulgar.

Imbue Item

(Matter • •, Prime • • •)

The Weaver's exquisite work grants an item she created a life of its own. A sword swings itself against enemies. A loom works the shuttle with no hands to guide it. A doll keeps watch over a sleeping child. This leaves the mage free to pursue other studies, confident her wishes will be carried out.

System: The object must be one the mage created herself. Matter grants the item movement, while Prime provides a bit of life force. The object isn't sentient, but follows a series of basic commands according to its nature. For example, a sword can follow a simple command such as "Attack anyone who enters this room," but "Find John Courage and kill him" is too complex. This effect is usually vulgar, though in the time of robot vacuums, some technology-minded Weavers have found ways to make their effects plausibly coincidental.

Sha'ir's Sentence

(Entropy • • •, Life • • •, Mind • • •)

The mage composes a poem expounding on a strength or weakness her target possesses. This trait may be real or perceived; so powerful are the mage's words, they become true. At the conclusion of the poem, she bestows a nickname upon the target that evokes those traits. Over time, the nickname becomes increasingly apt. For example, by naming an enemy "the Foolish," he'll be prone to making poor or reckless choices. If she names a friend "the Wise," on the other hand, others will come to trust his judgment and seek his advice based on the smart decisions he makes.

System: Entropy ties the nickname to the target's fate, while Life and Mind change the person to reflect the description. The mage's player chooses an Attribute the nickname fits. Rolls involving that Attribute gain 1 die for a positive nickname, or lose 1 die for a negative nickname. The Effect lasts for a number of rolls equal to the mage's Arete, or until the end of the Chapter, whichever comes first. This effect is coincidental.

Hollow Ones

The poet will be discontented even in the streets of heaven. The poet is always in revolt.
– GK Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Alone In The Crowd

Ridley was being followed, which was ruining a perfect rainy night.

It didn't take a hint of magick to pick up the tail. They were used to eyes following them, the long-past-quaint stares of judgmental straights, but those didn't avoid like this one. Those rested in the self-assured confidence of conformity, taking Ridley in, judging with a scoff or a smirk or a commodified fetish blush, and then moved on. Reflected in storefront windows and cheap chrome, this one glanced, then glanced again, then again, the small appraising analysis of the concealed interest, mixed with nonchalance and confidence, a mix the prospective stalker never really mastered.

They turned a corner, passing from the obvious glare of Chinatown neon into the dripping back alleys behind bakeries and butcher shops. The steady downpour made every heavy boot step a splash, one which synched perfectly with the gradually increasing bass leaking through the heavy metal doors ahead. A small glance back caught the painfully commercial disguise, one you could snatch off any mannequin at the mall, a cross section of Eddie Bauer. It belonged so fiercely that it overcompensated. No Traditionalist would be caught dead in that, no matter how stuck up their own ass they were.

But here, in the shadows of Chicago, approaching the backdoors to the Three Happiness Dim Sum House, someone like their tail couldn't possibly belong.

The doors opened, and the bass vanished instantly, revealing the dim back room, crates and cardboard boxes stacked to the low ceiling. Ridley took a moment to shake their limbs, shivering off droplets of water that had no doubt made their immaculate makeup look like a scene from The Crow. Ugh. Typical. At least it came naturally. As natural as pretending not to see the tail. They left the door just a little ajar for him, letting the water provide a subtle trail to follow. 'Round this stack, behind the next, and the door opened to a cozy pool hall. Officially, it had been closed since the early 2000s. For those who knew how, the tables remained in use, a single plasma screen with a leather couch playing whatever 90s cyberpunk movie the bored looking girl behind the register wanted. It was almost always something by Kathryn Bigelow, a charmingly nostalgic time capsule for outcasts who now had to look toward the future. Ridley waited exactly long enough for the doors behind to open before passing through another, seemingly vanishing, and being seen to vanish.

If the lost pool hall was a relic of the 90s, the rave was pure 21st century. The bass was back, and tooth-jarringly hard, enough to vibrate the smoke pouring from overhead machines. DJ Dorian held court over the packed space, strobes and blacklight making a melting watercolor of psychosomatic sensation that defied the nostalgia of yesteryear for a brave new tomorrow. Ridley permitted themself a moment to bob their head to whatever remix of a remix of a remix Dorian was pounding before reluctantly turning their thoughts to a higher volume. It didn't matter what the music was before Dorian recked it and redecked it; Ridley could feel the tendrils of questing questions probing out from him, welcoming freely offered information, and it was as easy as the fresh memory for the DJ to pick it up. They grinned as he looked up from the vinyl, dreads whipping smoke away from his teashades. Those hollow eyes glanced back to the door, and more tendrils delivered the memory to the heavies flanking the portal, one lanky motherfucker with skin like leather who still practiced Social Terrorism and a pinstripe who looked like bare-knuckle boxing was his favorite hobby. Funny how Prohibition fashion had evolved into something sleek and new, yet timeless. The same could be said of even the most anachronistic of them, now.

Eddie Bauer made it exactly one step through the door before they caught him on the jaw and in the gut. In the Hollow aspected rave, among the renegade mages and Disparate guests and the odd friendly vampire, he stood out as much here as Ridley did out there.

They came back around, watching impassively as the heavies ripped an earpiece out of the catalogue disaster's ear, pulled a hypertech pistol out of his jacket, and pressed a knee to his back. Ridley leveraged one boot heel on his hand and applied pressure.

"I sincerely hope you've got backup, because if it's just you, you're ruining a perfect rainy night."

We Are Not

So, they sent you to me, huh? Fuck, they're sending the baby witches to me for guidance. So much for my firebrand image.

Not what you were expecting? I get that a lot. Everyone has the idea of the Hollow One as a crusted-up goth all draped in lace. I dig on the black, but frankly, I've got more important things to be doing than maintaining the Byron-esque aesthetic just to keep the salons happy. No, not fashion salons. Fuck's sake, you are new, aren't you?

It's fine, kid. Expectations are a sign of the young and old, alike. The former has dreams, the latter disappointments. And you're sitting at the cusp, aren't you? You don't fit anywhere, but you dream of what might be, what you might accomplish. And who could blame you? You've discovered you can twist reality with ritual and will. Made you feel kinda godlike, huh? Until you found out the other kids can do it, too. So you're a little less special. Then you found out you don't do it the way they do. A little more special again, now. But they think you do it wrong. So they packed up their toys and told you to hit the bricks. You've got your creepy little attic with your creepy skulls and books and off-brand esoterica, and you dream of the glory days of gothic punk when the Alley hadn't been turned into a condoplex, but you don't have anyone to work the Will with.

Ah, cheer up. Goth, unlike Bela Lugosi, isn't dead. It's just grown up and out, bigger and weirder. Still, it seems like every bookstore Brontë has a stack of poetry, but no real Art. You're starting to see the futility of factions.

I know your story. Any of us would. It's my story, and the story of every Hollow mage. You've found your kind, but you're exactly disappointed enough to understand that whatever fucked up family situation you're entering probably won't be any better than the one you left. But you still dream. You still hope. It's just covered in the ashes and shards of failed promises. You're broken and beautiful, and you're waiting for something to make sense.

So, welcome to the scene. You're not alone. Things are worse than you imagined. We're going to make art and wisdom out of the wreckage we've inherited, or die trying. And we're going to rage against that machine and laugh and cry, win or lose.

What? No, the Hollow Ones have never been a movement. You're looking for an origin point to a group that's only about a century old, and even then only of being lumped together by virtue of exclusion. We're the castoffs, the leftovers, the survivors and refugees of a dozen dozen different paradigms that didn't make the cut for you or the Council of Nine. But still, a group all the same.

I suppose it would make more sense if I started at the so-called beginning. Of course, it's not really that simple, because if you ask three Hollow Ones where we come from, you'll get two answers and seven theories. And a fight—we love to argue about it. And then probably fuck.

Birth from Aesthetic

If you want to understand where we come from, or the more divisive when, you need to understand the basic underlying themes that make one Hollow: rejection, adaptation, and ego.

Rejection is simple. You've felt it. You don't belong. In a world of established norms, even supernatural ones, you don't fit in. Clearly you've got a piece of reality by the tail. What you do works, but everyone else in this fucked up magick club is pissed off because you don't do it like they do. Worse, you probably do it kind of like they do, in a way that, by their reckoning, shouldn't work, but it still does. When it comes to the need for belief, the stratified codification of how means as much as why, and since you break the rules and still get it done, it pisses them off. It threatens them, right down to their very faith. You are an aberration, their own little pocket of potential Paradox, and worse, an abomination of their precious Traditions, undermining the work they've invested thousands of years into.

Adaption is why they're so pissed off. Hollow Ones build their magick piecemeal, a patchwork gumbo with a little bit of everything. The more academic of us like to think we're the explorers of a purer kind of magick, one that insists it's not about your paradigm, but about the will under it. Nine different Tradition mages cast spells nine different, but similar, ways. Nine Hollowers can cast it ten ways, and more if we put our minds to it, with bits and pieces from every one of those nine mages we mentioned. Getting fucked up on alchemical cocaine

arranged in a Goetian interpretation of a Hermetic Tree of Life while chanting to death gods? You do you, sweetie, but the Ecstatics, Verbena, and Hermetic wand twirlers are going to pitch a fit you stole their shit. That's just how you work, how you think, how you do, and it's not about fitting into a Tradition or Convention; it's about learning who you are.

And that's ego, the complicated one. We can do anything, as long as we believe it's going to work and has meaning. That's no different from any mage, really, but for us, there's no underpinning system that says it works, just the proof of results. So yes, Saturday Morning Cartoon Time: Believe in yourself! You're a beautiful reject using stolen cultural lore to discover who you are.

That's the part we've become more aware of lately. Cultural appropriation is a pretty asshole move to make, even for self-described assholes. You rip a people's beliefs and history apart for your own profit, it makes you a colonizer. Colonialism is all about steamrolling others instead of listening, growing, adapting, accepting. Your magick quilt is unique and special, but don't be like some white chick from Sonoma trying to sell sage smudge sticks like she has any claim to Lakota Sioux tradition. A righteous Hollower doesn't appropriate stuff; they understand it and integrate it into their awareness, pursuing a holistic truth of the relationship between themselves and the universe. Just remember this: The difference between appropriation and adaptation is whether you punched down or up.

Fuck, I can't believe I sound like this. But hey, I probably stole it from a Hermetic. Or a Chorister. Or... ah, who gives a shit.

The other part of that complication is that half of our power comes from that self-actualizing belief, and as any yogi can tell you, ego is a dangerous thing. You come off like a Luciferan talking a lot of smack about selfness, and how being an outsider makes you strong and gives you a unique perspective only a Darkling can have, and we end up as self-righteous as any Tradition Willslinger. So, you throw in a healthy dose of nihilistic pessimism mixed with Addams Family-level love of the decay and hope and joy, and you balance out, more or less, as Hollow.

Which isn't really something that's ever not been in style. And that's the final ingredient: Style. Romance. We reject the commercialism but long for the dreams they sell. We're looking for the authentic in a world where even magick is slowly strangled into limited lines of thought. That's why, if we believe in Ascension at all, it's not a form anyone else can stomach, namely letting everyone find their own path to a divine truth. Our world would truly be free, a legion of individuals, sharing and respecting, but never dictating. No gods, no masters, just people. We want the dreams that never came to be, and we dream of the world that never was.

The easiest origin story is that we've always been around. When you see that being Hollow means being an outsider, you start to understand there was no single proto-Hollow Tradition. Some like to say we are the castoffs and leftovers from the earliest pogroms and cullings, survivors and exiles who kept the tatters of their faith and wove it, oh-so-ironically, into whatever new developments in magical belief and practice came along, just like Christians making Jesus' birthday the same as Mithras'.

So the seeds were there, but where does the big black rose that is the Hollow One tradition come into bloom? Again, arguments, and every one of them safe to believe — and equally meaningless. But for the sake of your edification, the most probable start is around the time of Byron and Shelly and the Victorian fascination with occultism (which was, itself, pretty commercialized). In the metaphysical debates in rich parlors we found the purchase of identity in lacy cuffs and fainting couches, opium hazes and absinthe and seances. Store-bought shams gave way to real results for the ones who found Awakening in their trappings, and you can bet that played a part in how other Traditions received us. If you ever wonder why so many of us are caught up in gothic fashion? We got it from the source.

On the other hand, some say we "happened" with the 1920s, with the liberation of thought in a post-war world. Flappers were slingin' with the best of them. Hell, some still do. Big wars tend to open minds. World War II did the same thing. All that death and loss leaves culture swinging like a pendulum in a storm, and that raises questions. Hollow Ones are those who never stop asking.

World War II, though... fuck, a lot of us fell around that time. All that dancing in the dark means you walk a very fine line, and the horrors of a global war left too many of us chasing the end instead of understanding it. That's how you get Nephandi. We weren't the only ones, but ugly tends to stick on outsiders, and we're known for those who fell. The worst are still out there.

So, are we an ancient consequence of questions and rejection? Or did we come into our own because of those scraps coming together like amino acids in a primordial pool? Kinda both? But as far as anyone else is concerned, the name "Hollow One" has about a century or two of mileage on it, if it matters. If you want to buy into the

TS Eliot angle, "We are the Hollow Men. We have always been there." Like everything else about us, what matters is what you take from it.

Who are these folks, friends of yours?

Oh. I see. Well, this is disappointing.

Everything We Were Never Promised

Ah, Agent Heller. Good morning. Or is it evening? Hard to tell. What's it to be, today? Another busted rib? Or perhaps the needle? Yep, the needle.

Questions? Why, my dear agent, you could have asked from the outset and saved us both a great deal of time. I know I'm not leaving here alive. My kind are not the figures of mystery you ascribe. In fact, aside from a necessary paranoia your team has instilled in us, I tend to find my fellow Hollow to be far more open than any other kind of "Reality Deviant."

So, shall we begin like David Copperfield? I am born? I grew up? No. This isn't about me. It's about Hollow Ones, what you think we are, and why you're so painfully wrong. Every angle flawed. Which is what we've come to expect. No one ever understands what we're about, because you're hidebound to stratified codification of reality, just like the Traditions. A clique, I get. A congregation? A cause? A plan? You poor, stupid suit.

Who You Know

Yes, I said cliques. Not cells, not chantries. We never fit into your world any better than we fit into the Traditions. Or anywhere else. That's the whole point, or weren't you paying attention in the coffee shop? It's never been about making everyone else think like we do. It's been about exploring the ideas of cultures and philosophies: where they end, and where the truth is, within and without. It's an individual journey, but every journey is better with friends. Our strength is in challenging the status quo. We challenge each other, learn from each other, support each other. You're on your own, but not alone.

Details? Why, certainly, officer. Always happy to do my civic service for the latest Aldous Huxley nightmare incarnation.

Aside from the individual cliques, you've got two major trains of thought, and the action that follows it.

Councilors

So, you may have noticed that us Hollow Ones don't like... well, anyone. Obviously you Technocracy types at the top of the list, you're against literally everything we stand for. For the most part, Nephandi and Marauders are right there with you, even if some of us make the mistake of treating them as friendlies. The Traditions might not be that much better, but at least they aren't actively hunting us after we cleared up that misunderstanding — well, for the most part. Councilors see that opening and want recognition with the Council. To them, the esoteric nature of Darklings means we're at the forefront of magical development, not as pariahs, but pioneers. They want to parlay that into cooperation, maybe even get the Nine to loosen up about frozen modes of thought and work together for a mutually inclusive possibility at Awakening. Funny thing is, considering the Virtual Adepts and Sons of Ether, there's room in there for you, too. Assuming you could open your heads up enough to grow.

Revolutionaries

Then you've got Revolutionaries, who don't want anything to do with mages who aren't Darklings. You look at what control has made of the world, your Big Brother bullshit and the religious conflict of the Traditions, and it's really easy to get why some of us want to opt out. You all fucked up everything, so why play into the system when it's the cause of it all? Of course, playing the outsider means you can get along pretty well with others who don't fit into the system. Vampires, werewolves, faeries, ghosts — Revolutionaries can call on some pretty unexpected allies. What they lack in unity with the Traditions, they make up for in unorthodox diplomacy.

The New Ways

Everything was working fine, until we turned out to be half-right: The world ended, but only as we knew it. Many of us survived, and while that means the end is only prolonged, it also means we've been brought into a new perspective on just how shit things can get. The Traditions and Conventions proved what we knew all along, that when it comes to the great game of chicken, you'd rather burn the world down than evolve with it. That's how the Disparate Alliance came about. We already knew how to stick together while respecting differences. Now, you've got Councilors humoring the idea of alliances anywhere we can get them, coming up with contingencies in case the Traditions can't play ball, even coming up with ways to turn you lot into friends. Revolutionaries aren't just looking for things to break, but considering what to build in its place, and not just for our own sake. If our power can mean a werewolf stabilizes a spiritual region, we can help. If a vampire is willing to use their influence to provide intel and expenses to keep us one step ahead, we have favors to trade. We're very, very good at being the outsiders who provide the road between different groups.

Leadership? Fuck no! We don't want to lead anyone. We've always been about individual expression, personal growth, challenging the present in pursuit of the never-was-world. That means we take our magick and philosophy from whatever inspires us. We are creatures of inspiration, and we've learned to share it with others. You ever see a vampire high-five a mage after kicking a HIT's ass? I have. Fucking tearjerker. We've entered the 21st century, and there's a lot of outsiders looking to change the system from the ground up. I've wondered more than once if your kind are the ones who think the gender binary needs defense. The whole 1%er thing, that's obviously you. How does it feel knowing the sleepers are waking up, and what they see is Hollow, and not technocratic?

Oh shit, maybe we are leaders. Godsdamnit.

Cliques

Cliques? I guess you could look at them like a coven, but they're more like a study group. You find some like minds, set out to answer some questions together with a somewhat united lingo and terminology so you can actually get somewhere; next thing you know you're hanging out and watching each other's backs. There's a lot of them, more than I imagine we have time to get into. Hmm? No, I didn't mean anything by that.

Incognitos

Those are the ones you should be worried about, assuming you've heard of them. Fuck, whatever you gave me is good. Incognitos are the coffee shop think-tankers who play conspiracy theory against your

Conventions. They spend all day and night amped on stimulants and hallucinogens to try and outthink you, then send it along as a kind of tactical playbook. You make a move, our little armchair planners have already come up with five responses, depending on whether we want to escape without a trace, turn the tables, or even take some prisoners. You wouldn't believe how many layers of response they can come up with. But you will.

Soundwave Masters

Before they went Burning Man and got corporate backers, raves were so damn authentic. Now that the fad is passed, they've made a comeback, and it's not just the music and the spirit, but the way you had to be connected to find them, or at least clever enough to connect the dots and do it yourself. That's what Soundwave Masters do. From closed down warehouses to lost desert dunes, magick comes to life in songs that shakes your soul. These DJs' are putting the message in the music, reading the clues in the minds of those in attendance and putting the juiciest bits into the bootleg mixtapes and custom files to pass along the Railroad. Some kids are using social media and SoundCloud to do it, but analog isn't just retro-cool; you technofetishists never seem to have the gear on hand to decode it.

Activists

We used to call them Social Terrorist Punks, but these days there's a lot more to striking at the enemy with violence as a good first resort. We've seen the success of protests, and you find these kids making daring sabotage raids as often as snapping the perfect pic to inspire a thousand sleepers to action. That's not to say they aren't still slapping back, and hard. The old guard are passing along every trick in the book, and if any Darkling is kicking your ass, it's probably an Activist. Nothing as romantic as the outsider ready to give up their life taking down the big bads. Like your fellow agents, for example.

Moles

I really shouldn't be telling you this, but did you know you've been compromised? No, really. This probably blows your mind, but we aren't all skinny jeans and frock coats. Some of us are just outsiders on the inside, and just as magick follows mind, it's a lot easier to keep your thoughts to yourself when you draw in like that. Someone like that, they could just... blend right in. Janitor, cubicle monkey, research assistant, how many people are all around you that you take for granted? How many are Hollow? How many are passing your secrets to a Soundwaver from a quiet place at the back of the club? How many of your technomantic gizmos are ending up in our pockets? Please tell me you're afraid, because you're a lot of things, agent, more than you realize, but you're not stupid. That feeling you're experiencing isn't paranoia, because you know I can't lie to you right now.

Masters

I'd put a little faith in any Darkling, but the Masters? Well, we've been around a long time, learned a lot of things without the benefit of centuries of tradition and infrastructure and lore to support us. We've been there, we've seen it all, and we've survived. Now, we thrive, and we never deny the young their chance to earn mastery on their own terms, just like we did. It's not about forging servants, it's about dropping wisdom and seeing what they make of it. What I really love is how much we still have to learn. The young keep me young.

Yes, I said "I". Why would I mention that under anything but duress? This isn't about my ego. Mastery is my own path, and my own prize, and I don't do it for anyone else's sake but my own. How I use it, that's how I help others. And how others can help me. For example, I've been around long enough to have friends in every clique. I go to the rave and hear from the Soundmasters what the Moles picked up about this raid you planned. I get the response tactics from the Incognitos, put in some calls with Ambassadors for a few friends you aren't expecting, and...

What We Make It

How are you feeling, Agent? Sorry for the conk on the head, my friends aren't as understanding of your situation as I am. Don't worry, you're safe.

Look, I know you've spent your life absorbing a lot of Convention conformity bullshit, but the reason you're alive is because we've been watching you for a while. You have a shot. You're going to stay here, sweat out those Progenitor pills, and start thinking for yourself. And when you're clean, we're going to talk again.

There's nothing you can tell me that we don't already know. Hell, there's a lot we could tell you about your New World Order that's above your pay grade. Stuff that makes my skin crawl. And I think it'll have a similar effect on you. And when you've heard me out, unbiased, I'll give you the choice every Hollow gets: anything you want. Our world has room for everyone, and that starts with just one person. One person standing up and finding their own path. No one said tech was bad. I love my smartphone as much as my vinyl, but I'm not destroying one for the other, and I'm not getting into a brand war. You can walk

away and walk right back to your masters, or you can go anywhere you want.

You know what the end of the world looks like? No choices. No freedom. No individuals. Stagnation, until the whole damn thing rolls to a stop and rots. That's why we're going to win. You can't stop the dream, the romance, the drama, the love and hate and passion that makes life all it can be, that keeps it going. You are your own enemy, and you get the chance to save yourself. You can go anywhere you want.

You can even come with me.

Mirror Smears in Absinthe Tears

Did your previous masters play with alternative realities? Like old episodes of Sliders or What If comics? I mean, who doesn't in our line, right? You'll find Darklings do the same thing. A puff of the poppy and a glass of green might just show you how the now might be a bit different. Hell, it might show you how different things actually are from what you think. The part that drives folks insane is telling the difference.

For example, Case? He absolutely teamed up with the Technocracy. Can't say as I'd blame him, really. How long can you wear the horns before you decide to use them? I don't think I'd call the Alliance dupes, though. The Traditions kicked all of us around. It doesn't matter who wears the boot that grinds you down.

Then again, it was all a rumor. Case may have been a part of it, but that doesn't mean we all had a vote. Remember, we're individuals. It's our whole raison d'etre. But how could the Traditions respect that when they're so caught up in monocultural supremacy? Regardless, Horizon fell, and they need someone to blame. Why stop pointing at us now?

Of course, we didn't do it. Doesn't stop the stink of suspicion following us, but it does piss most of us off. If we're going to get stuck with the bill, we'd like to know who ate the lunch, and maybe take it out of their hide. Not for the sake of clearing our name, but because we're done taking shit for the mistakes of others. Frankly, sometimes it's as good to be feared as it is to be respected.

What do you mean which one is true? What did I just say about insanity?

Fr/Enemies

Some of us have split off to join Traditions over the years. It's cool. Everyone is seeking their own path, and Hollowers never make a claim to objective truth. If you think the Verbena's death cult stuff is for you, we're not here to say you're wrong. Darklings who find their way down a different path aren't traitors, and they're always welcome back.

Verbena are some of the most common allies. It's a pretty natural fit, seeing the connections between romance and death. Of course, they tend to look down on our melodrama, and we get an eyeroll over how fucking grim they can be. Doesn't tend to end relationships, but it's a thorn that rarely comes unstuck.

Ecstatics are natural partners. We dig the opium and orgies, and when we come together it's a truly righteous party. But, and here's the irony, we're there for the story, and they're there to get so fucked up they come out the other side changed, meaning the journey we take never ends up in the same place, and that makes for an awkward afterglow.

Sons of Ether always seem surprised we're so into tech, but what do you think has provided the means of connection with other outsiders all these years? Even in the Victorian days, mysticism was the hot new shit, and we kinda get the idea of magick as technology. You think Frankenstein was written as a treatise? We quibble over values, but we share a lot of the same goals; they set the stage, and we act the play. Were you a drama club kid? They're the techies. Give 'em the respect they deserve, and they'll shower you with toys you never dreamed of in the Conventions.

And of course, there's the other creatures of the night. Conventions call them deviants, Traditions think they're Tass factories. Us? They're pals, especially the outsiders among their own kind. You want to make weirdo allies? Friendship is magick, baby.

Character and Traits

Now that we've had a glimpse into the Hollow soul, let's talk about bringing them into your game.

Concepts

Here's three concepts to use as player or Storyteller character. Bring your own stats.

Byronic Knight

Activist? Hell no. You came to your Awakening in the midst of the Ascension War, and it was a question of seconds between individuality and becoming another brainwashed Technocrat. The only thing you ask is that you take as many of them with you as you can. If that means going back to the institute and crashing as many of the kids out of being turned into good little straights as you can, so much the better.

The Harlem Connection

All your life you've been working for the common good of all people. It's just that it's people of color who don't get as much of it. The system is geared to keep your people down, and they've been doing it with economic disparity and about four hundred years of exploitation. The system may call itself the New World Order, but as far as you can tell, there's nothing new about it. By day, it's BLM rallies. By night? You're taking opportunity back to the people. You're here for the underdog, and it's time to show they can bite back.

Media Royalty

Soundwave Masters are awesome in the club, but the new wave is social media. From Instagram to TikTok, you've got your weapon in a smartphone, with a few unfair upgrades the mundanes don't enjoy yet. Call it style or magick, your rituals work with a dozen filters and a thousand hashtags, and you deliver intel to your allies and inspiration to your Sleeper followers with the push of a button. Show'em the magick of networking into the 21st century.

The Good Stuff

Lastly, here are some Hollow-style goodies to use in your game!

Chaos Magick (Instruments)

To a Darkling pursuing the Chaos Magick ethic, anything and everything is a tool if it fits the scene. Remember, the romance, the story is everything, and evoking a response is the primary facilitation of willworking. While the creepy trappings of Gothic culture traditionally appeal, from their clothes to their trinkets, no art should ever be discounted. From cameos of lost lovers to particularly inspiring anime, evocative songs and beloved poetry, the play is the thing. From passion comes power. The audience must feel something profound, even if the audience is the Hollower, themselves.

Death and Beauty (Paradigms)

Hollow Ones are famous for their "Everything sucks and then you die," attitude — which is why they all but embody Everything is Chaos, an Illusion, or a Mistake — but that same passion speaks to a hidden spark of hope buried under their fatalistic mien. Those who fell too far, particularly their infamous Nephandic rogues, went all-in with the One-Way Trip to Oblivion, but for the true Hollow, the romance of decay is mourning broken promises and missed opportunities. Without hope, there is no despair, and under their bleak worldviews and pessimistic catchphrases, there really is an indomitable spark that yearns to Bring Back the Golden Age that never was, and to Have Faith. Just don't point it out; they wouldn't dignify it with an answer.

Divergent Protocols (2 pt. Supernatural Merit)

Maybe you were brought over from the Technocracy or did undercover work and picked up some of their techniques. However you come about it, you've got a talent for Protocol-style magick, and have no difficulty accessing these abilities, given the right equipment to make the magick happen. The availability of such gear is up to your Storyteller and may require you to raid Convention facilities and shipments. For example, beginning cybernetics requires ST approval and may come with inherent risks of its own. Just remember what other Awakened may think when they see it.

Anarchist Braggart (1 pt. Social Flaw)

You just don't know how to keep your trap shut. Most Darklings aren't nihilists per se, but you throw so much shade it gets you in trouble. At the least, you talk shit about everyone's beliefs, perhaps mistakenly thinking it's going to urge them to your way of thinking. At worst, you happily boast that if the Hollow Ones can take down Horizon, then they can conquer anyone who gets in their way. Congrats, now everyone hates you.

Whenever the opportunity to throw your weight comes up, make a Wits + Empathy roll. Success means you manage to hold your tongue. Failure results in roleplaying a very bad social decision relating to your overbearing opinions, with only a Willpower point holding it back. Please note, the nature of this flaw is antagonistic, and cannot be used to make a well-educated point, nor should it be used in groups which find this detracts from the fun at the table.

Riding the Rails

(• • • Correspondence, • • • Time)

Coordination between cliques and sanctums in a group as decentralized as the Hollow Ones calls for specialists: romantic souls of travel and resistance. These Riders are a special breed among the Darklings, calling nowhere home but the road. Couriers who complete an apprenticeship with a veteran Rider are introduced to the Railroad: a path of interdimensional shortcuts trusted messengers can use in a pinch. It's not just about saving time, but being there right on time. Effectively, it links Darkling sanctum doors into a single network, which a

Rider can pass through even if they've never been there before.

System: Initiated Riders can feel the Railroad just by touching a door in a Hollow One sanctum, giving them an immediate accounting of all destinations and their relative condition (on fire, under attack, holding a seance, etc). Selection is a free action, but the Rider may take as much time as they want making their choice. Moreover, the Rider can choose to arrive later according to loose conditions, such as "When I'm expected," "When I'm not expected," "When no one is there," though they will not have any idea exactly what time or under what circumstances that will be. Due to the nature of the Railroad's long establishment, as well as the links being between sanctums, this rote only requires a single success to work. Of course, the Rider cannot take anyone else with them, nor can they take more than they can carry; the Railroad is not made for passengers, and it sure ain't a moving service.

This Effect is coincidental only because it must be performed within a Chantry or Sanctum.

Chapter Two: The Middlers

If the idea of loving those whom you have been taught to recognize as your enemies is too overwhelming, consider more deeply the observation that we are all much more alike than we are unalike.

– Aberjhani, *Splendid Literarium: A Treasury of Stories, Aphorisms, Poems, and Essays*

The Ahl-i-Batin, Kahu, Sisters of Hippolyta, and Wu Lung are all hopeful but unsure about the Disparate Alliance. They might simply sail a different current — not purposefully keeping separate, but simply headed in their own direction. They might have bad history, internally or with other Crafts, that needs to be sorted before they can jump in.

Muddy, Bloody Histories

For much of history, blood feuds were recognized as legitimate. If one family insulted another, or worse, a son of one slew the son of another, the injured family would be permitted to take payment in blood from their wrongdoer. Such causes led to infamous feuds, such as between the Hatfields and the McCoys, the Campbells and MacDonalds, and the many, many rivalries and hatreds between organized crime families in Sicily and early 20th century America.

While mortal law enforcement addresses these matters today, in the world of magick, blood feuds are still a consideration. Therefore, being members of a Craft — especially one as storied as the Ahl-i-Batin, Kahu, or Wu Lung — is a good way to earn enemies without even making an attempt. These Crafts have long histories, and those histories come with bloody enmities.

Characters from these Crafts should remain aware that while they may not be representative of their Crafts' historic activities and old rivalries, they may be held accountable for them in lieu of the actual perpetrators. Such is the way of blood feuds. Practiced mages of these Crafts inform their newly Awakened peers the same thing: While the Disparate Alliance is your best hope, be wary — it is a pit of vipers.

If centuries of fighting have taught these Crafts anything, it's that betrayal can come at any moment. It's therefore a question of who's canny enough to strike first and hardest.

Ahl-i-Batin

Raise your words, not voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder.

– Rumi

Ripples on the Water

Adjusting the butterfly-shaped clip holding her hijab in place, Safiyah lowered herself to sit primly on the rim of the splashed fountain. The square in front of the media company's offices was almost empty; it was the middle of the morning, not an important time for meetings and well ahead of the Paris lunchtime exodus. That was why she'd chosen it: a few quiet minutes when she could bend Yves Barbeau's ear, without anyone else clamoring for his attention.

While she sat, she removed small, metal cubes from her vegan leather satchel and set them down in the fountain. They did very little. Just made a few small adjustments to the flow of water. Tiny little nudges.

"Yves!" she called out delightedly as his tall, bulky figure emerged from the glass doors of the company's main campus building.

"Safiyah, always a pleasure."

She smiled and moved over on the stone rim of the fountain, making space for him beside her.

"What did you want to talk to me about."

"Straight to the point," she observed, smile widening. "You're interviewing a gentleman from Valor Petrochem in an hour, right?"

She barely waited for him to nod. She knew the answer.

"I just wondered..."

She used this phrase every time she spoke to Yves, and she saw him respond: that little sparkle of curiosity in his eyes, the tolerant amusement in the way he tilted his head. Guard down, primed, and receptive. She almost sighed in relief.

"Whether you're going to cover their activities in Yemen?"

"Yemen?"

"They have their eye on the MJR refinery. They've hired mercenaries, attacked MJR executives. Nobody's reporting it outside the country, though."

"Because?"

"Because Valor's parent company has stakes in an obscene number of media organizations, internationally."

The water in the fountain trickled and splashed behind her, very slightly out of sync with her speech.

"But not yours."

That last part wasn't true, but she hadn't left Yves a lot of time to check that. She'd barely given him time to fact check what she'd just told him. She knew him. She knew what he'd do first and what he'd take a risk on. And she could see it in his round, approachable face: that thrill of a real story.

She handed him a slim manila folder from inside her bag. Just enough to get him started. Besides, it wasn't the contents that mattered, it was the gesture that sealed the deal. She breathed a sigh of relief as Yves checked his watch, said his goodbyes, and darted inside again. She'd worked for years to build this connection, to prime Yves to follow her cues and respond to them – not only with magick, but by genuinely delivering good information that had advanced his career.

And now it had paid off. Within hours, the backlash would begin against the Technocracy's operation in Yemen. They'd have to divert resources, scale down activity. She'd bought other members of the network time to move against them. This Node of the Web of Faith would hold.

Safiyah paused only long enough to collect her little cubes from the fountain before she left. By the time the Technocracy in Paris went looking for someone to blame, she'd be back in Marseilles, her visit to Yves forgotten.

The Journey to Understanding

We're called The Subtle Ones, and we've been here an awfully long time. We don't expend a great deal of effort constructing narratives about how long, or why, or precisely where. In my opinion, that's the greater part of the reason why we're dismissed: We don't trade in easily consumed propaganda about our motives or identity. The other part, of course, is that even though we were there among them, Europeans and Americans didn't regard us as part of their world, so we were regarded as inconsequential.

We can't be summed up in a handful of pithy statements or pseudo-mystical jargon. We're all too aware of the dangers of stereotyping. And yet, because a friend of my teacher requested it, and because a limited understanding is better than ignorance, I must try and condense millennia of subtlety into a thirty-minute briefing. This will be educational for both of us.

First, here are some things that are true. We strive for a true experience of Unity. The end goal is unity with the Divine, but in order to approach that destination, we must find unity of thought and purpose, unity with other human beings, and unity between the disparate parts of ourselves. We are ascetics. We discipline our bodies and minds so that we aren't distracted by our selves, the better to focus our attention on the divinity that permeates and underpins all things. A healthy body and a trained mind make fewer demands. We're less aware of them, and so we're more aware of the Divine.

On Unity

Now we've established some truths, let me start with the falsehoods. They're not lies; other mages don't willfully misrepresent us, but they don't understand us either. They haven't tried. The greatest misconception of all is about our origins.

Other groups of mages tell our story like so. Once upon a time, there was a great conflict between the mages of Asia. Many Persian and Arabic mages were caught between the two factions. One night, a group of Akashayana sought refuge among a group called the Darwushim. The dervishes and the other mystics began to dance together, the Darwushim in their spinning ritual dance and the Akashayana moving through their katas. Supposedly two men came together in the dance and were unified into a being called the Khwaja al-Akbar, a being that both was Unity and conveyed it, and was the first Ahl-i-Batin.

I wasn't there, of course. I can't say for sure. But tell me, do you think it's more likely that an entire magickal heritage was created by outsiders, by accident, or that a learned Batini mage was present that night and introduced the others present to unity and communion? What about when I tell you that Khwaja al-Akbar means Greatest Master?

We are not an accident. We're older than that story, and unity is achieved through study, dedication, and discipline. Through achieving oneness with the Divine. Not through a moment of ecstasy and good fortune. There is no single point of origin for us. In Arabia and North Africa, people who thought the same way reached the same conclusion, and at a certain point we recognized one another and came to share a name.

Think about how little sense that 'one magickal night' story makes. History is a progression towards one-ness, a slow journey towards understanding. The tale of the Night of Fana is the opposite of that: a moment of purity, then a fracturing and splintering. Understanding derives from God, not a moment of communion with another human.

I think it's interesting, no? You can understand a lot about these other mages by how they try to define us. They position us as 'part this, part that,' cut up so they can fit us into their frame of reference. Sort of ironic, I think, that we pride ourselves on understanding but haven't made ourselves understood.

The ihn-Talaqin

This is another phrase you may have heard in relation to the Ahl-i-Batin. Or the Entelechy, perhaps? Yes. The being that was 'released' in the 'creation' of the Khwaja al-Akbar, and shards of which the Ahl-i-Batin all contain? Yes. But no. Entelechy is a principle, not an entity. It's somewhere between the soul and actualization. It's harder to explain than I have time for... but what I want to convey to you is that this is another half-truth. Entelechy is a useful concept to understand what it means to recognize and approach the Divine in ourselves, in other beings, and in the world. It's not a spirit.

The Ahl-i-Batin are, like every other mystical tradition, a society of belief, not a nonsense genealogy. The lesson is that if it seems too simple and too story-like, it absolutely is. We are poets, astrologers, viziers, diplomats, and scientists, and we do not need symbols or myths to define ourselves. What we do need is to start telling our own stories. How can we reach any kind of understanding if we don't communicate? It's a difficult proposition for a group that has always prided itself on remaining subtle and unseen.

The Devil King

There was a time in the early centuries of the Common Era, when Djinn — devils from other realms or mages fallen to the dark side — threatened our homelands. The greatest of them was also one of the greatest of us, Ishaq al-Jannani who became Ishaq al-Iblis. He delved deeply into understanding the Qlippoth, internalized what he studied, and fell to infernalism. Because of him, the Batini created the position of Qutb — 'Judge' is a roughly appropriate translation — to help guide others' pursuits, frame them in the pursuit of the Divine, and keep our studies on the right lines.

Even in that era of dissolution, strength came from togetherness. This was the first time we united with our Persian cousins, the Taftâni. They're everything we are not: blatant, showy, and bold. They're dangerous, especially when the bounds of reality are drawn as tightly as they now are, but they're geniuses. While we work within our limits, the Taftâni break them... No, I'm here to tell you about us. You can ask your own questions of them.

Our Golden Age

The other thing I'm sure you've heard about us is that we created Islam. That, too, is backwards. The religion of Islam was founded by the prophet Muhammad, and to the best of my understanding he was not one of us. We didn't make Islam. Islam didn't make us. But we're sympatico. We're based on many of the same principles. Like Tawhid, by which I mean the Oneness of God. God is a single perfected being, but the Divine extends into every area and sphere of existence. The truths of the Divine are communicated by study and revelation, and there are no intermediaries: Every one of us, every human, is responsible for our own connection to God. I could be describing the Ahl-i-Batin when I say that, or any Sleeper Muslim.

It makes sense. True ideas, put into words by the same cultures, will resemble one another. It is, in fact, the basis of scientific thought; some things are true, and therefore they can be observed and described consistently.

Our golden age was during the time of Islamic rule and Islamic science. Another digression: Europeans will tell you we were a kind of "Middle Eastern Technocracy," as if the Middle East is one single culture, running entire states behind the scenes, through puppets and proxies. We are not and never were. We have scholars and philosophers, we're influential, and our ideas are in sync with the Sleepers around us. That's not the same as controlling. Naturally, when our ideas are compatible with the ideas of Sleeper states, and we are integrated into those states instead of in hiding, as mages are here in France, history and culture develop in ways that are beneficial to us. It's really that simple.

I'm told it's still that way in some parts of the Arabian peninsula, but I'm not so sure. Diasporas have a way of romanticizing home, and I don't think mages are above that. I do know I'd rather be in Marseilles right now, with all its problems, than with my cousins in Algiers.

I guess you can thank the diaspora for strengthening the way we think. The more we spread out, the more we look for commonalities and truths, the underlying connection between all things. The more we want to know Unity.

Ignore that. That's not a lesson or a truth, it's my mind wandering. You're here to learn.

Confusion and Disorder

One thing is true of every golden age: It must end. Ours concluded when Genghis Khan's armies swept through and left our governments in disarray and our cities in the hands of foreign powers. We hadn't recovered before Christian mages declared us enemies. That's the course of history. Things change and fall apart.

In an attempt to hold the world together, we joined the Council of Nine. Oh yes, we were there for its founding. What better way to reach out and form communions with our siblings than to help shape the worldwide network of them? I don't think I'm spoiling the story to tell you it didn't last.

Coming and Going

If you know anything about the history of North Africa and the Middle East, you know that the last five hundred years are a record of shame. Don't misunderstand me: The burden of that shame doesn't fall on us, but on those who plundered entire continents to feed their own empires. While we worked within the Council and strove for unity, European nations sought to buy, sell, and steal our dignity, freedom, and even our history. Of course the Ahl-i-Batin left the Council of Nine. They made it painfully clear there was nothing for us there. What's more surprising is how many groups stayed.

We have more in common with the Sleepers of the Arab world than the mages of the global west. These are our families, our friends, our loved ones. The Traditions are only an illusion of unity, a distraction from the real thing. That doesn't mean we can disregard them, any more than we can other mages. When we refocused on our homelands and driving out Western interests—often, but not always, linked to the Technocracy — we became selfish. The Taftâni, those bright, brilliant, blatant mages? We let them stand at the front lines of the fight. They were an easy target, and we did our best work while they distracted the Technocracy. It was cold, and I don't think I can look you in the eye and say it was necessary… but again, I wasn't there. We gain nothing by passing judgement on the past, only from understanding it.

Of course, identity goes far beyond where one lives. I am African, I am French, I am a Muslimah, I am an Ahl-i-Batini. We're not limited to countries where our philosophy was born. Some of us came to Europe from its colonies, or to America as workers for Henry Ford and other industrialists. We're still part of that network, that community, of faith and belief. And yes, of magick.

This Confluence of Time and Space

And that concludes your history lesson. You can thank me later because I'm not done. I told you all of that because the past makes a framework to understand the present. A web of knowledge, instead of a list of facts.

I'm not going to spend a great deal of time telling you who we are. I'm told that many years ago we used to have factions. Personally, I think that's because it impressed the Council of Nine. Five khanates made us look five times more magnificent. We've always been scholars, alchemists, judges, and ascetics, and we continue to be so. Those values aren't confined to the Islamic faith, either. The traditions of criticism and legal and ethical scholarship in Judaism mean we attract many scholars and students from that faith, too.

The Web of Faith

I've already explained that we're a global sect, as widespread as Islam and, although more rare for us, Judaism. Even before social media made it easy to be hyperconnected, we were in constant contact with others through the network called the Web of Faith.

The Web of Faith began as a network of aqueducts. First we moved water, bringing it to dry, desert cities. Then we moved Quintessence through the same channels. As we came under threat from the Inquisition, Djinn, and — allow me to be frank — Europeans, we connected those Nodes and channels together, and set up a network of watchers to maintain and safeguard it. It's become a matrix for communication and a web of trust. It's also a bank of power. A deep, rich well of power there for us when we need it. It's hard to imagine if you haven't experienced it. It's like drowning in light. Imagine the untapped power of a primal Node, and then multiply it by another Node, and another, and another.

It should come as no surprise that the Technocracy went after it with unholy zeal. Their cover story is oil. Most attempts to appropriate Arab oil aren't attacks on the Web of Faith, but they are an extremely convenient disguise for magickal action. When the Technocracy threw its weight against the Middle East, the Web of Faith foundered; some of it we destroyed to keep from their hands. We've had some major successes since then. We've reclaimed some Nodes, restored some connections. We've even nursed some of the Web's strands back into existence.

Naturally, a lot of our work is focused on protecting the network, not only from the Technocracy but from

every single other group of mages in existence. Don't look surprised. You're already thinking about the things your friends or chantry could do with access to reserves like that.

It's not as though we keep it to ourselves. Every magickal order with roots in Africa and the Middle East has a role to play. We share. Just not with people who would use it for destructive ends, or who've consistently shown over centuries that they don't value us. Descendants of the Ecstatic dervishes, eastern branches of your Celestial Chorus — anyone who's shown they can be trusted. Sometimes, of course, we misplace our trust. It's an extremely dangerous mistake, and we correct it swiftly.

You might wonder how those of us far from the center of the Web contribute, and I answer you: This is where those who threaten us are strongest. We keep our enemies close.

Tutelage

Our magick works through symbolism and pattern, through trained minds. And so we spend a lot of our time on education. It's a slow path. We learn architecture, sciences — physical and social — and practice wellness. Accessing education, let alone helping other people access it, is a fight. Not a glamorous one that mages aspire to, but a necessary one. Ignorance is the antithesis of Unity; the process of reaching towards the Divine requires an open, agile mind. Ignorance is more widespread and more oppressive every day. We're fighting the tide.

It's not generosity. We need it. We cannot aspire to Unity if we leave our brothers and sisters behind us. That's a false path, and it only leads to isolation.

Subtlety and Submission

Subtlety is important to us. We don't work openly or cause painful, wrenching change. That's allowed us to fade out of sight when we were under threat and progress long-term plans like maintaining the Web of Faith. Increasingly, the time for subtlety seems to be past. In America they put children in cages and ban us from entering the country. Here in France, it's forbidden for a woman to cover her face in public. I don't need to tell you that excludes us from a great deal of public life. From study to public office, we have no voice. If we can't even walk into a police station to report a crime against us, are we safe? Worldwide, there are hate crimes against our people — friends and family, people with shared experiences, and in some cases actual Ahl-i-Batin. Then of course our homelands respond with dogmatic, extremist movements, and the cycle turns vicious.

And our doctrine of subtlety means that we should play the long game, work slowly for change. It's extremely hard to remain subtle in these circumstances. It's a constant tension. Let's just say... sometimes I envy the Taftâni.

Hope Over Experience

We've always worked through alliances. First with other local mages against the Devil Kings, then with the Traditions. Now we have a new alliance for the new century. I want to be hopeful about the Disparate Alliance, but I'm cautious. I don't speak for all of us in this matter. I can't, and I would never aspire to. We're people with common aspirations and philosophy, not an army marching in lockstep. That said, personally... I have concerns.

We are unlike the others in the Disparate Alliance, and they are equally unlike one another. What holds us together? What causes will we create and throw ourselves behind to maintain the alliance? What will people expect of us? For example, we now find ourselves standing awkwardly next to the Taftâni. I respect them deeply, but I don't see how we can work together with so many differences... and so much bad blood. I also don't see us throwing away centuries of slow, patient strategy to accommodate their enthusiasm for action.

I've always found it reasonable to put my trust in people, not organizations. There are kindred spirits throughout the Crafts and even the Traditions. The Web of Faith is a testament to that. I might even cautiously suggest there are people of principle in the Technocracy who can rise above their mandate of control for its own sake.

It troubles me. But I have to believe we'll be better for reaching out and trusting in others than for locking ourselves away.

The Real World

When all's said and done, what matters is that we make space in the world to be studious and to progress towards Unity. If that can be done through diplomacy and education, so much the better. That will mean taking some leaps of faith. Like talking to you.

Futures Hidden in the Past

There is no single future. God is infinite, and so are the possibilities that exist within His creation. Some of the futures we've glimpsed — not me, personally, because my attention's set much closer to the present, but my colleagues — are more troubling than others.

Nephandic Victory: The Ahl-i-Batin have been fighting infernalists for thousands of years. Our campaign against them gave rise to the Web of Faith. Not only visions, but clues gleaned from the recent past suggest the Traditions, the Technocracy, or both are infected with Nephandic spies and saboteurs. If need be, we'll move against them — subtly, as we always have. If it's too late for that, and the Nephandic grasp on those factions is irreversible, we can fade away from their attention as we have before. Caution and discretion come naturally to us. In this distinctly unpleasant future, we've seen ourselves an underground resistance to the Nephandi, occasionally reaching out to save mages in need — or silencing them to ensure our own survival. Sacrifice is noble, but ultimately unhelpful.

If we're right, the Web of Faith is an unbelievably high-value target for the Nephandi. We may be forced to choose between protecting it and remaining hidden.

The Sphinx: We've also glimpsed a future where an entity calling itself the Sphinx supplies us with cryptic messages and hints at world-spanning schemes. Like any group of scholars with inquiring minds, we'd find that hard to resist. I like to think we'd be wise enough not to trust a mysterious messenger, though, and that we'd work as diligently at unmasking the Sphinx as untangling its riddles. Attempts, mundane and magickal, to identify the Sphinx have all been fruitless—though some of us believe that finding no name is the creature's name.

We Are All Connected

We don't have many enemies. We're not visible enough to be hated, and it's kept us safe for a very long time. It's more accurate to say there are people we keep a watchful eye on. Conversely we don't have many close friends, just those that we trust.

Al-Jannani's Children

I spoke earlier of Ishaq al-Jannani, who gazed too long into the abyss and made space for it in his soul. He's been dead for thousands of years, of course, but his legacy lives on. Despite our Qutb doing everything to guard inquisitive scholars from harmful delving into darkness, plenty follow the same course al-Jannani did. They argue we can't defeat the powers infernal if we don't understand them, and then in understanding they embrace them.

Unfortunately, they don't brand themselves as devil worshippers. They go among us, turning a lifetime of subtlety to nefarious purpose. Worse, they remain part of the Web of Faith. Part of our duty in maintaining it is to be watchful for traces of their poison. It's intense, and almost impossible to maintain any perspective if one thinks too hard about it.

Mokteshaf al-Nour

The Mokteshaf al-Nour are scientists. They were with us when we created the Web of Faith, but they separated from it, and us, in the Middle Ages. They aligned themselves with the Technocracy as we did with the Traditions. Lately they've made overtures not only to us but to the Taftâni, and to other groups who trace their origin to the Arab world. The Middle East, I should say. The Mokteshaf al-Nour have been focused on Turkey since it was the Ottoman Empire, and their interest in Africa is minimal.

They've presented themselves as free agents, strongly implying they've drawn away from the Technocracy in principle, if not in action. It's too soon to be sure, and there's nothing to be gained by hasty judgement. I'd like to think, though, that there's common ground. They value learning, clear thought, and they understand the role of Allah in all things. The alternative is that the Technocracy are manipulating them, holding out the promise of finally recognizing them as a full Convention in return for handing over the Web of Faith. That's not a risk we can take.

The Taftâni Problem

Subtlety won't work here. We're going to have to confront this problem, and soon, although it goes against everything we're taught. Head on is their favorite approach, and moving slower is as good as snubbing them. We have a lot to answer for and, we must be fair, and honest, and acknowledge that we did wrong by them. The sticking point is how we repay them. It can't be their way. We can't let them put us, and the people we protect, and all our goals at risk in an act of apology. I feel extremely fortunate that I don't have to make that decision.

Apostates and Erstwhiles

We maintain links to the Traditions as well as the Disparate Alliance. When the Ahl-i-Batin quit the Council of Nine, some migrated to the Order of Hermes. We have less in common with them now, but it's reassuring at times to know there are still people amongst the Traditions who understand us, and who know more than the stories others tell about us.

The Faithful

Those who stand alongside us to maintain the Web of Faith are true friends. No matter what their allegiance, we share a duty and a perspective no others understand.

These people are the ones we trust absolutely and for whom we will, if we're obliged to, step out of the shadows.

Character and Traits

The Ahl-i-Batin's position and approach to magick makes them well-suited to discreet operations. They're as concerned with the problems that beset them as people as the philosophical conflicts of mages.

Concepts: Muwahhidun

Muwahhidun (singular: muwahhid) simply means "one who believes in tawhid," and so describes all of the Ahl-i-Batin. Batini aren't explosive frontline fighters. They're scholars and creators who work quietly behind the scenes, advancing their causes and the doctrine of Unity.

The Media Monitor

You're one of France's foremost media literacy and transparency advocates, patiently working to combat ignorance and misinformation and bring about shared understanding. You've done this work since before you Awakened, and it came as a sharp surprise that it brought you into such close contact with the Technocracy. It's a tense relationship. Every agent you've met insists they're doing the same job as you, trying to shake the Sleepers out of ignorance and avert a new dark age. But they're not. You want them to find the truth; the Technocracy just want them to believe a subtly different set of lies. Still, you find common ground with their media branches, on occasion.

You're third generation French-Algerian, and you're proud of how your experiences have given you an outsider's perspective.

You've benefited enormously from the Ahl-i-Batin's well-established network. Your mentor is based in Beirut, and you've assisted — and been assisted by — mages all over the Arab world.

The Global Citizen

Your family amassed a fortune through land ownership, shipping, and now technology development. You could theoretically buy and sell small countries, but you're not remotely interested in doing so. Your older siblings manage that side of the business; you attend to the Nodes. Plural. Your family owns the land on which a large proportion of the Web of Faith is embedded.

You travel, trade, and move money around to keep what you have, and obtain more of the Web. You're rebuilding it slowly, reaching out to trustworthy local mages the Ahl-i-Batin have allied with in the past and gradually bringing them into the fold. It sounds noble, and it is, but there's a cloud to every silver lining. You also have to stay alert for Technocratic and Nephandic influence throughout the network. Suspicion goes against your generous nature, but you've learned to harden your heart.

The Self-Reliant Disciple

You were born in Syria at the turn of the Millennium, but that feels like lifetimes ago. You've been shuffled around through numerous bureaucracies, losing loved ones along the way, until you found yourself alone and isolated in Ankara, Turkey. You took comfort in your faith, for which you never needed anything but yourself and a moment of quiet. You don't remember at what point you reached for the Divine and felt it touch you in return, but you do know you can sometimes make yourself one with the world and spread your senses through it. Sometimes you can do other things.

You've never received a moment of training in magick, never even heard the term Awakened, but you've trained yourself to push beyond physical hardship and emotional trauma to reach for the Divine. You know you have a purpose. You don't know what it is, but you're sure it involves alleviating the suffering of millions of people like you, restoring them to their lives.

Tariqa

Tariqa, meaning 'the way,' refers to the training, traits, rotes and magickal techniques the Ahl-i-Batin refine in their dedicated pursuit of Unity.

The Ahl-i-Batin's paradigm holds that all things, all people, are parts of a united whole. They're specialists, therefore, in magics that manipulate space and thought.

Communion

(Mind •••, Time •••, optional Correspondence ••)

The Ahl-i-Batin achieves communion with another individual, the two working as one and sharing thoughts as though they shared one mind.

System: The more successes, the more communication the participants are able to achieve instantaneously. Mind magic allows them to collaborate telepathically — or, in their parlance, achieve momentary one-ness — and Time allows them to process communication and act on it. With the addition of Correspondence, the communion can take place even if the participants aren't physically close to each other. This Effect is coincidental.

Fana

(Correspondence • • •, Mind • • •, optional Forces • •)

Fana means ceasing to exist, in the sense of denying and sublimating the self. When the Ahl-i-Batin use it, they mean they cease to be an independent, discrete entity. Their connection to some other entity, in some other part of the entirely of being, is complete. They share that person's senses and can guide their actions.

System: With Forces • • the mage can also project their voice through the person with whom they're co-locating, as if speaking through their mouth. This Effect is usually coincidental.

Out of Harm's Way

(Correspondence • • •)

All points are one point, and all people exist in all places simultaneously. Until an Ahl-i-Batin deliberately removes a person's ability to interact with certain points in space. With this rote, the Batini sets a person slightly out of sync with the world. Whatever they try to touch, they find slightly out of reach.

System: This Effect requires four successes, plus any required for duration and to affect another creature. This Effect is coincidental with a short duration, which can be passed off as a moment's clumsiness. When it lasts longer than a round, it's usually vulgar.

Patterning

(Mind • •)

The Ahl-i-Batin build their Effects slowly, over time. Through repetition they reinforce small, subtle patterns of behavior in those they interact with regularly. If every time a friend helps the Batini, the mage squeezes their hand or tells them "You're very gracious," over time they'll associate that gesture or phrase with a duty to help.

System: Through Patterning, an Ahl-i-Batin can program one behavioral 'nudge' with a set trigger. The Effect can't become permanent and requires reinforcement while it's still active (e.g., if the mage initially allocates successes to maintain the Effect for a week, they have to reinforce it within a week, costing additional successes). Successes beyond those required to affect the target and maintain the Effect translate into a dice pool to activate the Effect. More significant nudges (e.g. taking a bullet for the mage) require more successes than minor ones (lending them a few dollars). This Effect is coincidental.

The Slopes of Mount Qaf

(Correspondence • • • • •, Mind • • •, Forces • •)

Mount Qaf was once the Horizon Realm of the Ahl-i-Batin, but it's long abandoned now. It's widely believed to have formed the foundation for the Digital Web, or one of its many zones. The Ahl-i-Batin treat it that way: they've developed the ability to collocate themselves in the Web and the material world, with their bodies, minds, and senses equally active in both.

System: Use the Teleportation Locations chart (**M20: How Do You Do That?**, pg. 76) to determine the number of successes needed. Split successes between senses and physical presence: Two successes in each means the mage can interact normally with their surroundings. One success in either means they're clumsy, or their senses are dull (+1 to the difficulty of Strength and Dexterity or Perception checks). This Effect is almost always vulgar, though the increasing utility of augmented reality technology means it can sometimes be coincidental.

Occultation (3 pt. Supernatural Merit)

The Ahl-i-Batin are unparalleled masters of Arcane; it rarely inconveniences them the way it does others. Their connection to others, to the entirety of creation, allows them to render themselves memorable. By purchasing this Merit, a Batini mage may choose when their Arcane background applies and when it doesn't. For example, they might choose to have an acquaintance remember a message with perfect clarity when they would otherwise forget the mage's visit, or let a friend follow them when they'd otherwise be invisible in a crowd.

Unity of Purpose (2 pt. Social Merit)

Cooperation and communion are part of your magickal practice, and you're at your strongest when you work in concert with others. When you cooperate with a mage who shares a paradigm or practice, you reduce the difficulty required by –1. If you cooperate with another Ahl-i-Batin, you reduce the Difficulty required by –2.

Web of Faith (1–3 pt. Supernatural Merit)

You defend and maintain a certain Node or conduit of the Web of Faith. Once per session, you can turn the Merit into equivalent points of the Chantry, Dream, Destiny, or Node Backgrounds. The benefit lasts for one scene.

The higher the Background rating, the more responsibility you have within the Web of Faith.

1: You're occasionally called on to support other mages in the network

2: You're regularly called on to support other mages in the network

3: You're responsible for the maintenance and defense of a few conduits in the network

4: You're responsible for one or more Nodes in the Web of Faith, a valuable and tempting target for the Technocracy, Nephandi, and sundry other magickal parasites

5: Your waking life is dedicated to maintaining the network, leaving little time for your own pursuits.

Exposed (1 or 3 pt. Social Flaw)

You've overextended yourself, done something blatant, or otherwise drawn attention to yourself. Choose one faction you regularly interact with (a Tradition, a powerful local Chantry, an influential mage and their associates). This group would prefer not to work with you. Their help isn't completely inaccessible, but it usually requires considerable persuasion and hefty promises.

For one point, you've alienated a relatively minor group: local journalists, city council members, or a group of mages with little influence. For three points it's a group who could be powerful allies.

Sphere Inept: Entropy

The Ahl-i-Batin abhor Entropy magic; dissolution is counter to all their ideals of unity. It's highly appropriate for an Ahl-i-Batin mage to take this flaw (see **Book of Secrets**, p. 94) to reflect that philosophical dilemma.

KOPA LOEI

(The Kahu)

Mana roots you to your past, present, and future. We don't have to always agree; mana can be tested and even challenged, but with respect and an understanding of one another's mana we are all equal.

– Tame Wairere Iti *(Maori Activist, TED Talk June 17, 2015)*

Life and Death

A bullet tore into Kailani's shoulder as she dove for cover behind a junked Corolla. She grunted, pressing her hand against the wound to staunch the flow of blood. "Damn it!"

"I clipped her!" Max yelled over the ringing of Kailani's ears. She was in trouble. Her kumu warned her about starting a fight she wasn't prepared to win. She let out a trembling exhale, channeling stored mana from her bracelet to her legs.

Footsteps quickly approached, the heavy boots pounding against the pavement reminding Kailani of drums. She counted to ten, sliding up the side of the car. Laka's blessing flooded her body, giving her a burst of speed as she bolted away. Her heart pounded as the shouting got closer. She searched for another way from the warehouse district.

"This is not the way of the warrior I taught you," an elderly man's voice scolded in Ṡōlelo Hawai'i at Kailani's shoulder. She ducked into an alley crowded with tents. After a moment's hesitation, she gingerly navigated through the crush of slumbering homeless until she reached a door-shaped mural behind a dumpster.

"I know, Uncle," she whispered as she pressed her hands against the frame of the painted door. "Consider this an act of mercy. Max isn't a bad guy; he just... made a bad choice." Her thoughts shifted as her spirit peered across the distance between the mural and the cave it connected to. It looked clear. She listened to the snores of the alley behind her, the distant shouting of Max to his gang.

"Stand and fight or cower in supplication," her ancestor warned. She ignored him as she focused on opening the gateway before someone noticed her hiding in the shadows.

"Kanaloa, guide my journey to your domain," Kailani murmured as she slipped through the portal and into the hidden sea cave. The sudden quiet made her head throb. Cool, salty air licked her skin as she hurried forward, drawing a small flashlight from her pocket. It was late, and being in this cave at this time of night was dangerous.

She strained for sounds beyond her ragged breathing and the crashing of waves.

"Prepare yourself, the huaka'i pō are marching."

Kalilani frowned, drawing a knife from her pocket. "Damn, I thought I'd have more time before the Nightmarchers showed up."

A foul musk of rot and stagnant sea water assaulted her nostrils as the drone of ancient chanting rose above the tides and echoed through the cave. She gritted her teeth and pressed forward. Tonight is going to be different, she swore to herself.

The mouth of the cave opened to a cloudless night sky and jagged black rocks piercing through crashing waves. Ghostly warriors in varying states of decay menacingly advanced, spears in hand, towards the petite Hawaiian woman. Their footsteps thundered. The legends said that she needed to lay face down and they would spare her.

She glared. She was a kahuna nui and she wouldn't yield to the dead.

Spark of the Divine

Now that the excitement has died down, you can listen to Uncle while your wound heals. You're seeking naauao, enlightenment, by looking into the past, yes? Let's clear something up right away. "Kopa Loei" is a combination of words that hold no meaning to us. Kopa, as you know, means "soap!" We're not sure where it came from, but we think it was intended to be a form of "kupa," meaning "citizen," and "loie," which is an archaic form of "laina" meaning, among other things, "law" in Hawaiian. This

nonsense phrase is what the others call us, but we more proudly call ourselves "Kahu," or "guardians." What we are called doesn't matter so much as what we do. I wouldn't go around calling everyone "kahuna" either; not everyone is an expert, and most times, from the lips of an outsider, it comes across as offensive. Kahuna is what we call doctors, professors, and of course, chiefs. If everyone that wields the spark of the Gods — mana, quintessence, or magick depending on who you talk to — is a chief, then no one is.

What do we call those of higher station? Auntie, Uncle, Ma'am, Sir, Doctor, Professor, and kumu for "teacher," if you feel like using a Hawaiian term. But you came here because you heard the whispers of the Gods on the winds to where mana gathered. Your world, little sister, has changed because you now hear and feel the breath and pulse of Hawai'i within you.

It's a wondrous world we've weaved into the mele, songs, of our ancestors. You thought the Kumulipo on New Year's was just a story? Nah, it's our history. The keepers of the genealogies tell our story backwards to remind us of who we are and where we come from. It's easier to see yourself as a part of the greater whole when you start with yourself.

We come from a long linage of explorers, warriors, and tradesmen. All bloodlines stem from the first humans who were born of the Gods. Before the Gods were animals, plants, the forces of the universe. But in the beginning? There was nothing but an endless void where the earth and sky collided to give birth to life. Each step of life in each age was created to shelter and give strength the steps that followed. As we are born from the Divine, we all carry within us mana.

We are intrinsically a part of the universe and flow from the lineage of Gods. We are but one people of many. Our Maori and Samoan siblings have different words and songs to sing, but we are ultimately one. We have an oral tradition that changes in each telling. It wasn't even until the 1800s that the Kumulipo was written down.

Long Boats and White Sails

Where the Polynesian people originated is a subject of debate. Lack of a written tradition makes it harder to judge, but we know in our hearts that we originated from a land beyond the islands on which we reside now. We were voyagers and explorers, loading up our ships with food and water and setting off across the ocean. We navigated by the stars and currents and found new islands, each housing new gods and beings of magick, and settled there. We repeated the process across generations, colonizing countless islands and atolls in the Pacific Ocean.

Then, for some reason, we stopped voyaging. We dug our roots deep, worshiped the gods of our islands, and deified our ancestors. We were content to clash with our neighboring tribes for mana and control. I've mentioned mana a few times now. Mana is the essence of all life; it surrounds us and all living things. It gathers and pools like water in basins where people gather in belief: in our temples, in theaters, on the battlegrounds, and amusingly, certain tourist attractions. In the early days, the people of the Hawaiian Islands gathered it through victory in battle, sacrifice, or from the natural process of sex. In the Maori tradition, mana was gathered from social dominion over another.

We were a force unto ourselves. We heard a call in a language we didn't understand in the 15th century, the Great Convocation. We were curious and, after much debate, a few kahu made the journey. Why didn't we join the world at the invitation? Outside of some communication barriers, it was our pride. We understood arrogance and decided to return home to our islands and gods, thinking that this would be the last time they'd reach out to us.

We were horribly wrong. As the universe and technology advanced forward without us, it was only a matter of time until someone else's voyaging brought them upon us. It was arrogant to assume that our discovered lands would remain undiscovered by others. Shipwrecks, disease, and metal weapons from the 16th century predate the arrival of Captain Cook in the 18th century, but it was Cook that changed everything.

There is a centuries long argument on whose fault it was that we were occupied and eventually conquered. Was it the Order of Reason? Was it the Technocracy? Was it the Celestial Chorus, which proceeded to convert our people to their God? Or was it the failure of the Traditions to help us when they realized what was happening? Or was it just mortal lust for power and greed? If you are willing to hear the tirade, the island spirits will tell you different things. Regardless, for all our power and prowess as warriors, we were not strong enough to withstand the mundane and Awakened forces uniting against us.

We were colonized and our culture, treated as savage and inferior by the invaders, was slowing subsumed by the invaders. Well-meaning missionaries converted our people to Christianity thinking they were saving our souls. Our kings and queens led the way, thinking they were elevating our people. They formed the Church of

Hawaii, forbade the practice of our native religion, and ordered our old temples burned. The loss of our culture was not sudden; it was just as the tides crashing against the stone. Erosion.

The only good was the abolition of the old kapu: prohibitions or laws. Why is this good?

Kapu established ali'li: upper class and kahuna mastery over the lower classes. This caste system forbade intermingling of genders at mealtime and prohibited foods that women and non-ali'li could eat, among other things. If a person broke a kapu, the punishment was always death at the hands of an ali'li. Kapu states that you kneel before those of higher station and not look at them or their kahuna. You didn't kneel because you are a kahuna nui, and your power gives you mastery over spirits.

Shifting Winds

Our islands are fertile and the climate auspicious to cultivate crops. In the early 19th century the rise of plantations accompanied a surge of slaves and indentured laborers that lived, ate, and worked together. Peoples of all cultures mingled and interbred. To communicate with the landowners and each other, a hybrid language called Pidgin was created from fragments of the creole language spoken by Native Hawaiians and intermingled with English, Cantonese, Japanese, Portuguese, and Korean, among others. Our peoples also merged — we were no longer an isolated Polynesian people but a mix of all of those that gathered over the generations.

The original practice of the kahu excluded most mixed children and foreigners . As a result, a rare spark of talent grew rarer. You weren't considered a proper kahu unless you were at least 50% Polynesian, and you were shunned if you looked too European. Our native population dwindled as did our original culture. If someone sought the erasure of our people, they were succeeding. We had lost a part of our soul.

But in the absence of the old ways, something new formed. We were down but we were not out. We created a new story. It was difficult. The devastation of the World Wars on the islands of the Pacific and the world left a wound. The resonance of the heiau, our sacred sites, changed, and the spirits cried out in rage and despair. We called upon the gods and to other Awakened for assistance in soothing the land. Our voices raised up as a

collective anaana praying to death, and after many months of ho'o-piopio sorcery we succeeded, for the most part.

Death is an inevitable part of the universe. To be a true guardian or keeper of the lands means that you must recognize the balance and the cycles. Just as life must begin, so to must it end, but that loss should not be wasteful. Depending on who you talk to, the changes wrought by the World Wars and their aftermath was a waste.

When the wind shifts, it is not always in your favor. The atomic arms race led to a tragic loss of life when the bombs dropped over Nagasaki and Hiroshima. It left a scar so deep on the psychological and spiritual landscape of Japan that I fear what someone might find. But the use of atomic weapons did not stop with the war's end; testing continued on the Marshall Islands, particularly the Bikini Atoll, from 1946 to 1958.

The local population of the Bikini Atoll was voluntarily relocated to the Rongerik Atoll under the promise that they'd be returning home in a few months. But the days stretched out, and they discovered that their temporary home could not sustain them. They starved and suffered before being relocated to smaller and smaller islands, their home denied them due to continued atomic experimentation. Years later, after the detonation of 67 nuclear devices over the Marshall Islands in 1970, some of the population returned home thinking it was safe. We returned with them, and found our erstwhile spirit allies destroyed or corrupted. The beautiful heart of our atoll's Umbral realm was now torn with weeping darkness.

Testing vaporized whole islands and exiled hundreds. Radiation seeped into the environment and made people sick. It was later revealed that biological weapons testing was also conducted in the Enewetak Atoll. Birth defects, illness, and a dome containing more that 3.1 million cubic feet of radioactive soil and debris sits as a reminder of what happened. Erosion and the rising sea threaten to unseal the cracking tomb. Humanity created a maelstrom of destruction and atrocity, and the Nephandi followed in its wake. They threaten our home islands and seek to feed on the spirit of our people.

A New Story

Our story has a glorious past, a troubled middle, and a future still unwritten. We must weave it together.

Hawaii Renaissance

Haole, foreigners, were the enemy, and even as we tried to be amiable to them, they were still invaders. Our native populations had dwindled with interracial relationships and the rise of tourism culture. People had been shuffled around because of the wars, and police actions that called men away from home under the draft. There was a stigma of having a non-American identity. People didn't want to acknowledge their roots. Those that practiced the old religion in secret refused to share with outsiders. Children were disowned and excluded for not keeping bloodlines pure.

It went so far as to deny children that showed a spark of mana the right to learn the old ways of the gods and islands. To our great shame, our small population of kahu grew smaller still. If we would not teach those few with the gift and reject them, where else would they go? Some sought other Crafts or traveled beyond to find teachers among the Traditions. Our pride hurt us, and almost brought about our own extinction.

The 1960s continued our downward path. We almost lost our language. Sure, we used a mix of English and pidgin to communicate but it's not the same as our native tongue. We almost lost the techniques of instrumentless navigation because the old Uncles wouldn't teach those that weren't "pure." Insistence on exclusion of students that weren't pure almost erased our cultural identity. Luckily, our people are resilient and stubborn; it isn't all doom.

We utilized local radio stations to teach people Ṡōlelo Hawai'i. Music and dance brought back our culture from the brink. It took a strong push from our ohana, but we were able to bring our culture forward and be proud of who we were as a people. We found compromise and moved forward.

Lost at Sea

Our desire to recover what we lost led some of our people to look backward. New archeological evidence of pottery from the earliest Polynesian cultures was discovered in previously unknown locations. We uncovered evidence of the mysterious and reclusive Menehune and forged ties with the children of Kamohoali'i, the shark god. To renew these bonds with ancient allies and reconnect with our ancestors is an endeavor of epic proportions, but these fragments give us hope.

Within our research, we realized what else we'd lost in the desire for purity. Mana is understanding the truth of your identity and culture, that which connects you to the land. Mana is both inherited and acquired. By restricting the type of mana we allowed within our ranks, we inadvertently diminished the mana of our islands. This revelation was horrifying.

We regrouped and realized that we didn't have an agreement on what qualified someone to be a kahuna nui or high priest. Ultimately, our collective research determined 10 divisions that might qualify someone to be a kahuna nui to a major god: anaana (praying to death), ho'o-piopio (sorcery), ho'o-unauna (the sending of evil spirits on errands of death), ho'o-komokomo (causing sickness), poi-uhana (spirit trapping), oneone-i-honua (special prayer services), kilokilo (divination), nana-uli (weather prophecy), lapaau (medical practice), and kuhikuhi puuone (heiau location and construction). After cross-referencing schools of thought on magick, we prayed to the aumakua, the ancestral spirit for guidance.

We agreed that someone that demonstrated their skill over each of the different domains governed by the gods to our ohana would be honored with the title of kahuna. People settled into roles based on competence. Those skilled in divination and prophecy would be our Oracles, kahuna kilokilo. Those skilled at navigating the seas and controlling spirits would be our Wayfinders, ho'okele-moana. Those more attuned with the pulse of mana and prayers would be our Flametenders, kahuna ho'omanamana, priests who imparts mana to objects.

The Oracles gathered with our communities to guide them towards more auspicious futures. They felt a great storm brewing on the horizon but could not predict all the variables. To our surprise, they turned our attention outwards. Our difficulties in Hawai'i, it turned out, were not unique. They pointed to our cousins in Bali struggling to free their economy from a dependency on tourism, in order to shift to more environmentally friendly practices to preserve their reefs. They pointed to the massive ecological destruction wrought by gold mining in East Java and the human rights violations there. They pointed to the dangers lurking in the spirit realm around the Runit Dome in the Marshall Islands and the forces that would see it breached.

Our Wayfinders ventured outward onto the spiritual seas, seeking the lands beyond from which our people came. They did not neglect to check in from their journeys from time to time, but following the Avatar Storm in 1999 our voices and spirits no longer reach them. It is difficult to enter the spirit realm, but the younger generation of Wayfinders has reached out to the Disparate Alliance in hopes of learning another route, that they may determine whether their ohana are still alive. Rumors suggest a place called "Ravana's Navel" does exist, under control of the Chakravanti; it allegedly allows passage into the spirit realm despite the storm. Others Wayfinders search the oceans for signs of lost islands reclaimed by the sea where our spirit allies may yet survive uncorrupted by man's touch.

Finally, we have our Flametenders. They are charged with identifying and protecting sources of mana. Many gain access to hard-to-reach areas while acting as firefighters or park rangers, but most try to stick close to home. It's difficult to protect a place if you aren't there, but sometime, people have a vision to journey afar. There are still undiscovered heiau out there awaiting discovery and protection from those that would despoil them. Mana sometimes crystalizes inside of objects as well, but many have been lost or stolen since Cook's arrival. A group of Flametenders are searching for artifacts taken from Iolani Palace in 1893 during the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. Their quest takes them to the mainland United States and even to Europe.

Ka 'imi Loa

A wise Uncle said something once that has stuck with me over the years, "We are pushing ourselves forward in time along with the universe. Just as the universe is developing and perfecting itself in all its parts, so should we."

Mana gathers at places of belief and power. Pele's chair, Pali Lookout, the Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, the Punchbowl, Iwo To, the Alamo, Disney... all the places where the modern and ancient world collide. It is our duty to protect and care for these locations, even those far afield from our homelands. We are the island, and it is our past and future.

How do we disentangle ourselves from the dependency on the military and the tourism trade without destroying our economy? How do we deal with local corruption that chokes the life from the people? These questions are hard to solve even with imagination and mana. It's not just about making the United States military or the tourists go away. Will granting Hawaii status as its own nation-state liberate us? Or will it just open the door for another Great Power like China or Russia to swoop in to fill the void left by the United States? Life doesn't have simple answers, and independence is only the first step.

We are divided on the best approach to take in protecting the lands under our watch: whether to preserve the remaining undisturbed land by getting rid of the tourists, or by establishing a guardianship that balances defending the land with supporting the people that rely on these industries. Regardless of what role we fulfill or what side of the fence we are on, we are unified in our desire to restore and protect the mana of our ancestral homes This is what a Kahu is — a guardian of our history, present, and future.

Looking past the realm of the physical, what is our purpose in the realm of the spiritual? Now we hit on the deep question! We're just in the shallows. We have to swim deeper to find what lies at the bottom of the ocean of life. We could be pawns in a cosmic game between the gods and spirits. We could be fighting a losing battle against forces we don't understand. Regardless of how a kahu is affiliated, we hold different roles. Now that you know who we are as Kahu — or, if you must, Kopa Loei — it's up to you to give your life meaning. As your kumu, I can only teach you the mele and show you how to use the tools the gods have blessed you with.

You could return to the daily grind and ignore all that I've said, or you could seek a vision. If you want my opinion, sister, you must journey out into the universe for the ka 'imi loa, the great search. You must learn more about the universe and become a member of it. Just as you would go to the ocean to make your voice like the waves, you must fill your soul with that of the universe.

Into the Storm

The universe is deep and vast, and like the ocean it has many streams. We sit on just one of them, but sometimes we catch glimpses of other streams — futures that could have been. The Week of Nightmares and the Avatar Storm have thickened the Gauntlet and made the Umbra nigh impossible. We've lost a generation of gifted Wayfinders in the wake of the destruction brought by the Technocracy. But some think they are still out there and can be saved.

Within another stream, our brothers and sisters aren't lost. They've found the land beyond from which all mana flows. If we make the journey, we can summon the lost knowledge and change the course of our future.

Darker waters reveal danger lurking. Something worse than death awaits us and dares us to seek out our lost homeland and brethren. Calling upon our ancestors is chumming the waters for the sharks that circle below.

Enemies and Friends

The aloha spirit of friendship can only go so far. How you feel is ultimately up to you, but here is my opinion.

Bata'a

We share a turbulent history within the confines of the United States. We sing to the Gods of our ancestral lands that are with us no matter where our journeys take us. Join in the dance and fight alongside them.

Celestial Chorus

Missionaries held an important role in the shift in our culture. Aunties and Uncles still hold deep grudges for those that inspired the kings and queens of Hawai'i to burn down the temples of the old gods. Are they culpable for the sins of those who came before? The younger folk still believe in the Christian God they were raised with. Those that seek to tear down our gods and our mana are not welcome—the missionaries already left their footprint on our people, and we won't let history repeat.

Chakravanti (Euthantoi)

All things must die. The guilty must be punished, but who are they to place judgement upon anyone else? Don't let them fool you; they're just as accountable for their actions. Trust them as far as you can throw them.

Kha'vadi (Dreamspeakers)

Respected cousins, aunts, and uncles. There is much that can be learned from these tribal shamans who have withstood the storm of colonialism and assimilation. I suspect some of our lost children have sought shelter among their numbers. Consider them honored kumu.

Technocratic Union

The embodiment of colonization and globalization. With them comes the destruction of the old ways. The old folks see the Union as the Great Haole invaders. Modern science gave birth to the horrors of the atomic age and the wonders of telecommunication. Don't make pacts with the devil.

Character and Traits

The Polynesian people are diverse, with each South Pacific Island possessing a unique culture, language, and mythology, and it is not possible to capture them all here. While the focus of the lore presented has been Hawaii centric, there is nothing that stops a Kahu from being a Hawaiian born Filipino, Okinawan-Japanese, Chinese American, or Maori.

Pressing political issues on the islands are based on a mix of environmental and socio-economic problems related to the main sources of economic stimulation: military, tourism, and agriculture. As volcanic islands, environmental matters are ever important, with concerns related to overfishing, reef damage from pollution, contamination from shipwrecks from World War II, and the flooding, power outages and possible food shortages that come with a hurricane. The recent volcanic eruptions

on the island of Hawaii are a telling reminder of the raw destructive power of nature.

Families on the Hawaiian Islands tend to work multiple jobs and live-in multi-generational households to support themselves. Commonly practiced religions are Christianity, Buddhism, Catholicism, Native Polynesian, or some mixture of some or all of them.

Paradigms

Paradigms that fit well for Kahu include Bring Back the Golden Age!; Creation is Innately Divine and Alive; and Divine Order and Earthly Chaos from **Mage the Ascension: 20th Anniversary Edition**; or All Power Comes from God(s) (**M20: Book of Secrets, p.189**); and We're All God(s) in Disguise (**M20: Book of Secrets**, p. 196).

Practices

Practices that go well include but are not limited to Faith, High Ritual Magick, Shamanism, Elementalism (**M20: Book of Secrets**, p. 200), God-Bonding (**M20: Book of Secrets**, p. 201), and Mediumship (**M20: Book of Secrets**, p. 202).

Instruments

Polynesian culture includes both oral tradition and dancing as crucial parts of their storytelling. Consider the use of singing or dancing as a vital part of your character's practice. Mana resides in objects. Consider family heirlooms or items used in ancestral religious practice, black and white stones found on a beach, driftwood, shells, feathers, and whale ivory found washed on the shore. Avoid using lava rock, human bones, or sand as these particular items are considered taboo.

Affinity Spheres

While the Kahu don't believe in Spheres as such, they do believe in the natural forces that are present in the universe and can use any. It was a long-held belief that a high priest was skilled in all aspects of magick. A mage that has a strong affinity for surfing might favor the use of Entropy, Forces, and Time, while a crafter might be talented with imbuing items with power with Prime, Forces, and Matter.

Concepts

Kahu come from all backgrounds; their journeys will eventually bring them home. Here are three sample concepts.

Activist

You've always been a firm believer in balance as a result of years of Buddhist school. You've watched with disgust as the landscape of Oahu becomes more urbanized to accommodate the tourism economy. People are pressed together and ruined by a rising cost of living that locals are struggling to afford. You are infuriated by the failures of the local government to properly manage its growing homeless population, instead pushing them out of the sight of tourists. All things are interconnected, so eliminating tourism would also cripple the local economy. Just feeding the homeless isn't addressing the problem. You've taken matters into your own hands by seeking out the paths the displaced have walked to arrive destitute on the island. Awakening has given you the power to heal their mental scars, and the ability to lead them home to the Mainland and the shores beyond.

Performer

You grew up dancing, playing an instrument, or singing the old ways and the new. Performance is your passion, and you tie your practice to the story your body tells. Stories thrive in the telling and the world is listening eagerly to yours thanks to the internet. Technology has opened a doorway to the world beyond your island, and you are readily following the path to learn more. You're eager to experience different cultures and teach your own. After all, life is all about experiencing the variety that life has to offer! You have a gig at a famous club in San Francisco, and you're going to finally meet your Virtual Adept bestie for the first time in person.

Voyager

Born into a tradition of Wayfarers, you inherited your great-grandfather's legacy, his passion for exploration, and his aumakua (ancestral god). Intensely inquisitive, you've adopted your family quest to understand the deeper mysteries of the universe and where mana comes from. Just as he sought out the legendary vanished lands that the Polynesian people originated from, so do you. You've pored over his notes and consulted with his companion, and something is beckoning you into the heart of the Mainland. Some prodding revealed he was on the trail of something big before he disappeared in the desert near Las Vegas. No one knows what happened, but you can't rest until you learn the truth. You've said your goodbyes to your ohana and packed your laptop, his notebook, and his koa nut rosary into your pack. The spirits and winds guide you now that the currents no longer control your course.

Harnessing the Wind

Many Merits and Flaws from **M20** and **Book of Secrets** would be appropriate for a Kahu with some minor changes to fit into the Polynesian culture. A particularly powerful Kahu-centered story Merit would be Stormwarden if the Avatar Storm happened in your chronicle.

For those desiring a character with a heavy lineage of divinity, consider the Supernatural Merits Fae Blood, Shapeshifter Kin, or Supernatural Companion favoring Menehune, Rokea, or another Changing Breed depending on where your character's ancestors are from. Or inversely, the Supernatural Flaws of Haunted (not every ancestor spirit is happy), Bound (you shouldn't make deals with every spirit), or Bedeviled might be particularly interesting if you wished to pursue a concept where you have upset one of spirits or Gods of the islands.

Aumakua (7 pt. Supernatural Merit)

The spirit of a powerful ancestor or nature spirit guides the Awakened of your family line. They are both an Avatar Companion and Spirit Mentor that guides your family through the generations and provides you insights to better understand the nature of the universe. This entity can teach Abilities, Rotes, and provide insights, advice, and information about previous traditions but cannot teach Spheres.

As with other character-related Traits, your Aumakua is a Storyteller character with its own agendas, personality, and so on. They ultimately want you to live to your fullest potential and could decide to deceive or punish you if they feel you are not on the right path.

Kapu (4–5 pt. Psychological Flaw)

With the circumstances of your Awakening and your Initiation, you've locked yourself into a traditionalist mindset. You've adopted the kapu (prohibition) of your ancestors, which interferes with your ability to work mana. The consequences of violating these kapu range from relatively minor to quite dire like the Paranormal Prohibition Flaw in **M20: Book of Secrets**, p. 83.

(4 pt.) You cannot take lava rock without soliciting permission from the gods. Doing so without their consent leads to painful consequences; until you can atone, you go mute.

(4 pt.) You cannot eat in the presence of a different gender. Doing so invites a migraine that reduces your dice pool for casting or performing a Skill by −1 until you can atone.

(5 pt.) You cannot interact with or defile a dead body unless you are preparing it for burial. The consequences of defying this ban are crippling: until you atone, you are unable to use Quintessence.

Rotes

Consider rotes like Traveler's Tricks in M20: How Do You DO That? p. 72-75.

Pule Pale

(•• Entropy)

The Kahu chants a call to Laka for protection before undertaking a journey or a difficult task. It's commonly sung at the beginning of a forest path.

System: This call for protection can either add:

- Successes to the caster or target's rolls to warn them of harm
- Successes to the caster or target's rolls to avoid harm
- Add botches to someone trying to harm the target of the spell.

A person protected by this rote might narrowly avoid a piece of falling building or hear a noise to alert them to an ambush.

This Effect is coincidental.

Accelerate the Current

(••• Forces)

When the winds and the currents are against a Kahu, they can invoke the wind god, Pakaʻa, to accelerate the movement of their vessel. Modern Kahu have adapted this technique for use with all vehicles.

System: You ignore difficulty penalties for exceeding your vehicle's safe speed.

This Effect is coincidental.

Searching for the Lost Path

(•• Correspondence/ •• Time)

A Kahu calls upon the guidance of the Sky Father, Wākea, to act as a bridge between points of origin and guide them towards a route previously traveled by another person.

System: Searching for the Lost Path rewinds the perception of time in the caster's mind, allowing them to see what path their target has taken. When the path takes them to the end point, the caster will be able to

Departure Time	Successes needed	Duration with object/ on location	Duration without object/ away from locations
1 hour	1	6 hours	3 hrs
1 day	2	12 hours	6 hours
1 week	3	1 day	12 hours
1 month	4	1 week	3 days
1 year	5	1 month	2 weeks
2+ years	6+	2 months	1 month

follow the course as something only they can see and follow, such as a bird or thread, until the Effect ends. The length of time since the target left the location; being in one of the locations of the target's journey; and having a personal belonging will adjust how many successes are needed and how long the effect lasts.

This Effect is coincidental.

Sisters of Hippolyta

You cannot buy the revolution. You cannot make the revolution. You can only be the revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere.

– Ursula K. Le Guin

Polynike's Victory

Poly was bleeding from a dozen cuts, and her heart could beat no faster. The humid night smelled of sweat and wet concrete. The moon hung high in the sky, painting everything in soft, pallid light. It was the final round of the tournament; there'd be a shower later and – thankfully – food after that. Her opponent was half her age but had done well for herself that evening, making Poly proud. She was small and lithe, with a pointed chin and a foxy sort of smile. They all called her Cosette now, but she was Ann when Poly first met her, a wiry ball of fury and teenage angst. Poly had been her social worker for a bit. Then, she'd been her mentor. Now, as they faced each other, both grinning and high on adrenaline, Poly was simply her Sister. Kid had earned that much.

"Polynike! Polynike! Polynike!"

They were chanting her name. That made Poly smile.

"Go, Cosette! Show her what you're made of, baby!" someone yelled loud enough to cut over the crowd's roars of encouragement.

Poly recognized the voice, and her smile grew wider. Cosette's girlfriend, Betty, was studying psychology and volunteered at the LGBTQ+ Youth Center downtown. Poly remembered meeting Betty, too; she was homeless and trembled like a newborn kitten when anyone got within a foot of her. The two of them had come a long way.

"Should I get a pillow?" Cosette asked, mimicking a yawn. Mirth danced in her youthful voice. "You're getting slow in your old age, Poly."

She lunged, but Poly blocked her blow and turned sharply, salt-and-pepper dreadlocks connecting with Cosette's torso, sending the girl stumbling backwards. The crowd went nuts.

"Win first, brag later, you brat" Poly said and blew her a kiss.

Cosette laughed and shook her head. They were both tired after a long day of non-stop fighting. Poly wanted to be done and would be more than happy to forfeit the match in exchange for pizza, and perhaps a bubble bath, if she felt like treating herself. Cosette would never accept that, though; she'd want to earn her win.

In the end, Poly won.

"You did well tonight," she told Cosette while they were showering in adjacent stalls.

"Thanks, but I still lost" the girl muttered grudgingly.

"Everyone does, until they don't" Poly said, pouring a liberal amount of shower gel in her cupped hand. "Don't be so hard on yourself. My first tournament, I placed second to last."

"No way. Really?" Cosette asked, her tone full of hope and disbelief.

"Really. But I kept joining every year and, one day, I found myself winning the tournament. It'll happen. Just be patient and keep at it."

They didn't speak for a while. Poly felt wrecked, and every single muscle in her body throbbed with a dull ache. Even her bruises had bruises. Still, her heart could burst with pride for the sulking girl beside her. For her Sister.

Amazonomachia

Grab a blanket and get comfy; I'll start with the basics. You know Wonder Woman, right? The comic book character? Well, she's supposed to be an Amazon princess from a fictional hidden island or something. Sorry, I haven't really kept up with all the retcons and

reboots. So, in retrospect, this may not have been the best of introductions, but let's roll with it anyway.

Mythic Nooks and Comic Books

Let's see, then; Wonder Woman's mother is Hippolyta, an Amazon queen that rules alongside her sisters, Antiope and Melanippe. Hippolyta has also made appearances in various movies and tv series of questionable mythological authenticity, though you're probably too young to remember those. In any case, this goes to show what a big shot Hippolyta was back in the day. She's also sort of how it all begun.

Before I explain, we need to get a couple popular fallacies out of the way. First of all, the Amazons did not hate or kill men, and they didn't mutilate their breasts to better wield the bow. This last misconception owes its existence to a false etymology, taking a-mazon to mean breastless. In fact, we still don't know what the origin or significance of the word is. However, taking into account the ancient stories of warrior women feeding their children mare's milk, it seems likely that a-mazon simply means one who wasn't breastfed. Epic, I know.

Another thing about the Amazons: They weren't real. The ancient Greeks didn't distinguish between history and myth, you see. Therefore, the things I'm about to tell you might be either or neither or both. The Amazons were basically the ancient Greek equivalent of sword and sorcery fiction. They made up this whole alternative universe where an imaginary tribe of imaginary women warriors had conquered half the world, their empire stretching from Libya to the steppes of Ukraine. And, much like their comic book counterparts, they dwelled in the hidden city of Themiscyra — which was most definitely not an island — somewhere in Asia Minor and were ruled by triumvirates of queens. They were ferocious, unyielding warriors, famous for their horsemanship and prowess in battle. According to myth, the Amazon weapon of choice was the bow, and they preferred to fight on horseback. Plot twist: The Greeks considered this particular fighting style barbaric and believed the bow to be the weapon of cowards. And the majority of the Amazon tales end up with one or more of them dead at the hands of male heroes or in captivity. So, you see, there's no real admiration in these old stories — only the fear of the Greeks that mingling with outsiders might cause their own women to rebel and demand to be involved in affairs of state and war.

War Gears and Male Fears

Why were the Greeks so scared of female warriors, though? To answer that, we have to go all the way back to one of the very first Greek historians, Herodotus, and his recitation of the Sarmatian tribe's origin. Herodotus relates how Heracles set out for his ninth labor: to retrieve the golden belt of Ares that had been given as a gift to the god's daughter, Hippolyta. Legend has it that the Amazon queen was so greatly impressed by the hero's muscles and bravado that she offered him the belt as a token of her love. Because, you know, of course the fierce warrior woman would give the magic artifact away in a haze of lust.

Here's what actually happened: Heracles and his pals planned to ambush the Amazons, steal the belt, and capture the three Amazon queens. The Amazons got whiff of that and charged the men on the beach. Heracles and Hippolyta fought, Heracles won, and Hippolyta chose death over surrender. Sounds like she really loved the guy, doesn't it? Heracles' bro and alleged serial abductor of women, Theseus—another story for another day, perhaps; just google Ariadne — took Queen Antiope with him to Athens. Heracles himself went his merry way towards his tenth labor with Hippolyta's belt and axe, as well as a bunch of captive Amazons.

No sooner had they set foot on the boat, though, than the Amazons overpowered them and took control of the ship. Naturally, being a landlocked tribe of horse riders, the Amazons didn't know the first thing about sailing and, therefore, ended up in Scythian territory, now southern Ukraine. In order to survive the steppes, the remaining Amazons raided the Scythian lands, causing much confusion as to where the invaders had come from. The Scythians and the Amazons met in battle but were well matched and, for a while, no one seemed to be winning. To put an end to the bloodshed, the Scythian youths asked the Amazons to join them as their wives. According to Herodotus' account, the Amazons replied thus: "We are riders; our business is with the bow and javelin, and we know nothing of women's work. We cannot possibly agree to stay at home in your wagons. We must be free to hunt and make war." The young men were not opposed to this idea but knew their elders would not approve. In light of this, they agreed to migrate with their warrior brides to the very borders of Scythia and create a new tribe, the Sarmatians.

Fun fact: Archaeological excavations in southern Ukraine during the '50s uncovered multiple graves that seem to have belonged to female warriors buried alongside their weapons. The thing is, the Greeks traded regularly with the Scythians at the time. And we now know that both male and female Scythians were battle trained and went to war. What you need to understand is that women

in ancient Greece were pretty much invisible. Not only were they not soldiers, they weren't even citizens. So, I think it all went the other way around, and this is the root of the fear we so often see reflected in the Amazonian myth. A bunch of combat oriented Scythian Verbenae clashed with the Greeks of Anatolia, causing women of the area to ask themselves "why not us?" and the rest is history. I mean, the conclave of Themiscyra still exists, and Sisters reclaimed Hippolyta's artifacts years ago. But as to where myth ends and history begins, we can only make educated guesses.

Women Scorned and Histories Mourned

Let's go back to Theseus and Antiope for a moment, shall we? With Hippolyta dead and Antiope in captivity, the Amazon triumvirate was in shambles. The newly appointed Amazon queen, Oreithyia, gathered her forces and marched against Attica to demand Antiope's return. The Amazon lines extended from the Hill of Ares to the Hill of Pnyx, and the battle for Athens went on for many months, until an oracle advised the Athenians to offer a sacrifice to Phobos, the personification of fear. Now, I don't mean to read too much into that, but it does kind of fit with what I've been saying about Greek men being scared, does it not?

In the meantime, Antiope—whether out of love or by force—fought at Theseus' side and was eventually slain by her own sisters. This great battle, named Amazonomachia — which quite literally means war against Amazons — is the very first account of the Athenians repelling a foreign invader. Keep in mind that the Amazons were supposedly a colonizing force to be reckoned with. A win over them meant that Athens did not become part of Amazonia, and Athenian men were not subjugated by female warriors using the weapons of cowards and lesser men.

Despite this setback, the Amazons retained a strong presence in the remaining non-Greek world. And here's where myth and history begin to merge. The Roman Emperor, Nero, had his female bodyguards carry Amazonian shields, whereas Emperor Commodus was so fascinated with the Amazons that he used to dress his mistress as one and, having a passion for gladiatorial combat, even planned to fight in the arena in Amazon costume. Centuries later, Christopher Columbus—yikes, I know—documented finding an island of warrior women who only raised daughters, whereas Cortés and other explorers followed rumors of Amazon-like all-female tribes all the way to the New World. The state of California was named after the fictional Queen Calafia, who ruled an equally fictional island inhabited by black, pagan warrior women. And then there's the Amazon River, which received its name after an expedition in the area was attacked by native female warriors.

So, you see, echoes of the Amazons are pretty much everywhere. Not all of those legends originated in ancient Greece; it would be silly to believe that. But there seems to be a common denominator here: Female soldiers

existed throughout history, despite what we have been led to believe. However, these women were vilified and systematically erased from history until they became nothing but legend. The Amazons of the old stories always end up dead, captured, or domesticated. They are more than ready to give up a life of freedom for the sake of a muscular (and probably well-oiled) male hero. Often, they are depicted as men-slaughtering extremists who abandoned their own male offspring to die.

Yet if you stop for a second and really think about it, you'll reach the same conclusions I did a while ago. At least, I hope you will. A nation comprised solely of female warriors is a completely ridiculous notion. Herodotus' account places Sarmatian men and women in separate, yet nearby communities, hunting, farming, and living together in harmony, love, and freedom. I believe that the lives of the women of Themiscyra were probably modeled after those of their Sarmatian counterparts. It is uncertain whether they indeed claimed the name Amazons for themselves or not, but it seems like they will forever be remembered by it. I have seen some of the artwork guarded by our sisters at the conclave of Themiscyra; our ancestors were not only warriors, but also farmers, teachers, healers, and philosophers. They were powerful and wise women alienated and turned into mythical villains by scared, anxious men whose own power waned.

Us Too

Now that you're all caught up with our not-so-humble beginnings, let's move on to the really interesting part.

Something Old, Something New

How did we get from that to this? To tell you the truth, it's complicated; I'll do us both a favor and skip the details. Like I said, there are stories of warrior women pretty much everywhere, but not all of them are related to the Amazons of Greek legend. In fact, until the early 1920s, very few Sisters of Hippolyta existed, and they mainly lived in Themiscyra, cut off from the rest of the world. But then the Greco-Turkish war happened, resulting in the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922.

Using the sacking of Smyrna as a cover, a number of yet unidentified Awakened attacked and obliterated Themiscyra, killing most of the Hippolytae. Oh, right; it's Hippolytae, not Hippolytoi, and don't let anyone get away with it. Hippolytoi is actually the male plural noun form. Kind of ironic how the Traditions insist on calling us that, isn't it? Following the massacre, the surviving Sisters migrated to Greece, the US, and the rest of Europe. I've always assumed that the location of Themiscyra was betrayed by someone on the inside, but the destruction and mayhem at the time was so complete and so devastating that it has been impossible to find any coherent account of the events.

Some of the remaining Sisters moved to northern Greece and eventually revived the conclave of Themiscyra there, whereas the rest of them set up brand new conclaves in France, Germany, Ireland, Colorado, California, and British Columbia. They established safe houses, built connections to the unAwakened society and hedge magicians, and revamped their organization. Conclaves are no longer ruled by triumvirates of queens, but by elected committees of seven Sisters who govern for seven years. Such a committee is called an epitropi. The German conclave thrived during the days of the Weimar Republic, but was short-lived and soon destroyed by Nephandi during World War II. The Irish conclave was very small from the beginning and eventually merged with the Irish Verbenae. The entire conclave of California disappeared during the earthquake of April 8, 1968, never to be seen again. So, now we're down to four main conclaves and several smaller ones that are affiliated with them based on proximity and goals.

The breathtakingly beautiful conclave of Themiscyra is located deep in the mountains of Thessaly and is populated mainly by older, world-weary Sisters. Hippolyta's belt and axe are kept there, alongside various other artifacts and amphoras detailing Amazon tales. Most of the younger Greek Sisters live either in Athens or Thessaloniki, though. I've heard some members of the smaller conclaves staged a coup a few years ago, but that didn't go anywhere. Apparently, the younger Sisters were pressing the epitropi to take action on the case of the wrongful conviction for terrorism of a female doctorate candidate in 2011, but the elders decided that it was too dangerous for the Hippolytae to make their presence known at the time.

Now, you might be surprised to find out that our own conclave is presently the most powerful one by far. Even our elders are green compared to the elders of Themiscyra, but I'd like to think we've done well. We kept Colorado afloat during both the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, using our gifts to help and heal in any way possible. We fought men and nature; it was war, even though it wasn't waged with weapons. We're based here in Denver, though we do travel where needed.

Then, there's the French conclave in Paris, and let me tell you, that's a whole can of worms if I've ever seen one. The Parisian conclave used to be segregated until very recently; white French Sisters and French-born

North-African or Caribbean Sisters met separately and were governed by two separate triumvirates rather than a single epitropi of seven, as was the case for all other conclaves. This changed in 2005, following three intense weeks of riots caused by the death of two black teenagers while attempting to flee from police officers. That paved the way for a much-needed change in the organization of the French conclave. An end was put to the whole segregation business, and a mixed epitropi was nominated and elected.

Last but not least, we have the tiny, but highly progressive Vancouver conclave. Out of the four conclaves, the Canadian one is by far the least susceptible to infighting. They became involved with the women's suffrage movement early on and now manage a number of non-profit organizations for various causes, including abortion rights, rights for indigenous women. domestic violence, and LGBTQ+ rights, among other things. I think part of the reason why the Vancouver conclave is so peaceful is because they keep sending their elders on pilgrimages to Themiscyra, and the elders keep staying away.

I know what you're thinking and, frankly, I kind of agree. We have so far limited ourselves to Europe and Northern America, but we do wish to branch out. Ideally, we'd like to have a presence in Africa, Polynesia, and Asia as well, at some point. It's not so simple, though. Their cultures are fundamentally different, and we need to respect that, which means we need to contact and work with women within those cultures in order to start building bases there. This takes both time and effort. According to some of the old texts, there used to be another conclave in Libya. We've had no luck locating it so far.

Second Verse, Same as the First

We covered ancient history and current politics; let's move on to mission. I mean, it must be pretty obvious at this point that we're battle-oriented, though it does all come down to what one defines as a battle to begin with. To be honest, we do what we always did. We study, we work, we vote, we heal, we fight. We fight tooth and claw — and hard, so hard — to make sure that women are free and have choices. Not so much with bows and arrows anymore, though some among us are scary good with outdated weaponry. But I won't lie; there's blood spilt more often than most Sisters would like.

Here's the thing: Resistance and violence are vastly different things. We resist a system that is inherently flawed, and we pick up arms in defense. We don't particularly enjoy it, and we'll be more than happy to lay them down if at any point the scales tip towards true equality. However, you should know that we're effective and merciful in our violence. We're closer to the unAwakened than most Crafts and Traditions, because remembering what we're actually fighting for is important to us. We're not some kind of trigger-happy maenads as many would colorfully describe us; there's purpose, wisdom, and honor in our war.

There are wounds in the world, you see. Infected gashes that run deep below the surface, rot and pus turning the blood of society septic. You're not much for metaphors, are you? Alright, let me put it this way: We try to restore a balance lost. We preserve erased histories of female achievement, we donate money to funds and organizations that help women in every way imaginable, we extend our considerable protection to women who need it, we extract women from dangerous places and situations, and we fight patriarchy in many capacities. We're social workers, doctors, lawyers, activists, scientists, teachers, academics, martial artists, MMA fighters — anything, really. Not one Sister is redundant, not one Sister isn't a valuable member of the Hippolytae. That's what you're signing up for, kid. Constant fighting, frustration, burnout. But also, sisterhood. And hope. There's always hope and, some days, this will be all that keeps you going. Other days will be better.

Just so we're clear, though, I don't want to hear any TERF or racist nonsense from you, alright? If you can't be a decent human being, I don't want you as my Sister — and that's sisters, not cisters. Good, glad we got that out of the way. I get that we sound sort of intense, and you probably feel overwhelmed, but we take care of our own. Nobody expects you to be perfect. You'll mess up, make mistakes, be self-righteous or self-absorbed. You'll act up, get in fights, scream your lungs out, challenge the elders for wanting to hide from the world, challenge the not-so-elders for diving head-first into danger, get mad at misogynists, get mad at feminists that disagree with your particular brand of feminism. You'll be glorious and devastating, and it will all be alright because we'll have your back.

Themiscyra Reprise

There's been a significant shift following the destruction of the original Themiscyra. We used to live isolated, staying away from Awakened and unAwakened politics. We used to be secure and content in our little corner of the world, hidden from everyone and everything. We were war-weary and jaded; we didn't want to be vilified or hunted down or enslaved. We craved peace.

The problem with that plan was that war eventually caught up with us. So, while we were merrily roaming the fields around Themiscyra, injustice continued. Women kept getting enslaved, tortured, and killed, and men kept enslaving, torturing, and killing them. #NotAllMen, maybe, but #YesAllWomen. We were stupid to hope things would be better in our absence — I'll give you that. No more.

I admit that a disheartening number of our elders still long for that peaceful, secluded existence. That's not really an option, anymore. Knowing the things we know, we can't in good conscience keep pretending we're obsolete. The truth of the matter is, kid, we may not be particularly wanted, but we are certainly needed. I'm not too keen on the whole Ascension War business myself, I'll tell you that much; still, how is defeating the patriarchy not part of Ascension?

There is more than one way to win a war, however, and we're a pretty diverse group. We do a lot of community work, and within our conclaves, we value all voices. That's not to say that we don't have arcane interests, though. We're still trying to figure out how Themiscyra fell and what happened to the California conclave in the sixties. We've various leads on Amazonian relics and so many secrets yet to uncover regarding our own history. The Hippolytae are a very old, very wounded Craft, and keeping up with a constantly, rapidly changing world doesn't come easy to us. Still, we're trying. At times, we even succeed.

Fragments of the Future

You know what else the ancient Greeks were pretty big on? Fate. If you ask me, fate's a horrible concept—this idea that we are destined to do this or that, and there's no way out of it doesn't sit well with me. Do you knit at all? Well, I like to think of time as a scarf. You start with some yarn and a number of stitches and, if you follow the pattern, you'll end up with a scarf, right? Some people might call that fate, when it's in fact a matter of choice and consequence. However, there is a point of indecision right before the choice is made, and that is our window of opportunity, our single chance to glimpse a possible future or two.

Phobos has taunted our Oracles with a timeline in which the Technocratic Union waged war against

the Crafts and massacred a large number of us. We had to hide and keep our heads down for a long time, until eventually the survivors managed to form a delicate alliance.

Artemis has revealed another: one where were no longer a sisterhood but had been swallowed by the Traditions. I think that might be the reason why so many of the elders are freaked out about staying true to our roots. But hey, you know what they say about self-fulfilling prophecies.

And then, there are those shattered, fragmented futures in which we've been played by the Fallen, or we've been turned to ash by others that were played by the Fallen. I have to believe we're not trapped in such a fate. I have to.

Frenemies and Bullies

I suppose we are not unjustly called Disparates; we do prefer to stand apart, though not alone. No Sister ever stands alone. It's a matter of perspective rather than snobbery.

Traditions of Grandeur

Eight out of nine Traditions consider us wild cards and fanatics, despite the fact that we've never actually done anything to deserve such blatant disregard. As for the Verbenae — well, we have a long and complicated history with them, as you may have guessed. It's true that our beliefs and practices are similar, but this only means that conversations at parties tend to get really boring. Because who wouldn't enjoy spending hours discussing the finer points of conceptualizing the Divine Feminine, right? Anyway. You could say there are some trust issues where the Traditions are concerned. I think we can't forgive their absence during the fall of Themiscyra and they're dismissing us because, um...victim blaming? They can't live with what happened, so it must have been our fault for being such unpredictable recluses.

Technical Improvements

And don't even get me started on the Technocracy; I will literally get hives. Fine, not literally, but you get my drift. The Technocracy is like those Greek heroes from long ago, always coming along to make things better — their definition of better, which rarely coincides with anyone else's. Funny how progress is never progress for all, huh? It all boils down to this: People should be free to make their own choices, their own mistakes. It's not our right to decide for them, but it is our responsibility to guard and protect their ability to choose.

The Dispossessed

There are other Disparates, naturally—yes, I'm talking of this Alliance now. You can trust them as far as you can throw them, which is still more trust than what you should offer either the Traditions or the Technocracy. We have what could be called a tentative understanding. The Kahu are alright; they act, they care, and they understand the importance of a strong community. And we stand by the Bata'a because feminism is cross-sectional. But it's not all sunshine and roses, you know? The Knights of the Temple of Solomon have been a notoriously patriarchal organization until very recently, and it's hard to tell whether this first female leader of theirs is a step to the right direction or a publicity stunt. To her credit she's extended an open hand, but I'm not convinced we should take it. Let's see these new "feminist" Templars walk the walk first.

Character and Traits

The Sisters of Hippolyta are warriors first and foremost. That being said, not all wars are fought with weapons.

Concepts

No two Hippolytae are alike. They share common characteristics, like compassion, courage, and a sense of justice, but the Sisters value diversity and strive to achieve true sisterhood by respecting their members' individuality and uniqueness. The following concepts showcase said diversity.

Social Justice Witch

You are the daughter of immigrants and spent half your life being bullied about your accent and name that no one could properly pronounce. Having experienced extreme prejudice themselves, your parents constantly urged you to keep your head down and avoid drawing attention to yourself. When you finally went away to college, you were able to breathe for the first time ever. You have now found your people among the neo-pagans on campus; you are part of a feminist collective and do volunteer work in a women's shelter. Magick is still very new to you, but you flung yourself to it with the same enthusiasm you approach everything else. You consider magic its own form of activism and intend to educate yourself as best you can about it — with the assistance of your Sisters, of course.

Mother of the House

You are a trans woman of color and have been an active member of the underground ballroom scene for several years, finally forming your own House. Your wards are mainly young LGBTQ+ girls; some ran away from home, and some were kicked out, but they all found their place with you. Taking care of them, you had to learn how to deal with PTSD, addiction, messiness, and broken hearts. You encourage and build up your children

without pressuring them, and you will fight viciously for their right to become who they want to be. Their stories frustrate you; their passion propels you. Magick has always come instinctively to you, and you use it to help, protect, and heal the people who look up to you. You strive to be a role model, a mentor, and a true mother to them. You are influential and well-respected among your Sisters.

Amazon Next Door

You are something of a prodigy within the ranks of the Hippolytae, a social worker who's been employed by several non-governmental organizations over the years and has been active both in the field and as a consultant. You've been on missions all over the world, and you've acquired an extensive network of Awakened as well as unAwakened connections. You are very committed, both to your job and the Sisterhood, and somewhat of a workaholic. You're firm and intense, but highly empathetic — when there's a crisis, you're the person everyone wants to have in their corner. Magick to you is simply a means to an end, just another skill in your already considerable repertoire. Being the latest descendant of a long line of Sisters, duty and community mean a lot to you. Sometimes it's hard to remember that the weight of the world doesn't rest on your shoulders alone.

Walking the Walk

To the Hippolytae, magick is a thorny path between the self and the vast expanses of the cosmos. One can be taught how to walk and navigate this path, but realizing its existence and finding one's own place on it is largely an intuitive thing. Identity is a work both in progress and in motion. No one understands this better than the Sisters, who consider themselves to be in a constant state of becoming rather than being.

Hippolytae Focus

The Sisters practice a version of shamanistic, ritual-heavy magick that incorporates elements of craft work and martial arts. Religion and culture also play a huge part in what each Sister's or each conclave's particular practice looks like — for example, French-born Tunisian Hippolytae lean towards elementalism (**M20: Book of Secrets**, pp.200-201), whereas Greek Hippolytae often favor god-bonding and invigoration (**M20: Book of Secrets**, pp.201-202).

Common paradigms include: Creation is Innately Divine and Alive, It's All Good — Have Faith!, Might is Right (**Mage the Ascension: 20th Anniversary Edition**, pp. 569-570) and Ancient Wisdom is the Key (**M20: Book of Secrets**, p.190).

Being a diverse and multicultural craft, the Hippolytae use a variety of instruments: blood and body fluids, sex and sensuality, bones and remains, thought forms, symbols, weapons, brews and potions, offerings, herbs, and plants.

Their affinity spheres are Life, Spirit or Mind.

Culture

The Amazons worshipped Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and so do many present day Hippolytae. The Sisters are big on tradition and proud of their roots; though very few among them can claim to have ties to the Amazons of old, they still celebrate Artemis' two major festivals.

Elaphebolia

February 26th was once a day for hunting and sacrificing deer to Artemis. Later on, living deer were swapped for some sort of sweetbread in the shape of the goddess' sacred animal. Nowadays, Elaphebolia has become a day of feasting, exchanging gifts, and spending time with family and friends. Daughters born on Elaphebolia are thought to carry Artemis' blessing and are often named after the goddess. There are places where the Gauntlet is weaker during Elaphebolia and, in times of need, a conclave may summon and consult with the Golden Hind, the spirit of an enormous female deer with golden antlers like a stag and hooves of bronze.

Amarysia

Celebrated on April 1st, Amarysia is all about games and friendly rivalry. This was originally a sports event, testing physical prowess and agility through racing contests, wrestling, archery, and other contests. Today, they also include debates, chess games, quizzes, and even competitive board games. It is also a day for practical jokes and the only time of the year when younger Sisters are allowed, if not encouraged, to prank their elders. No one is safe, not even the seven who sit on the epitropi, for it is understood that what happens on Amarysia, stays on Amarysia.

Merits & Flaws

Legacy (2 pt. Social Merit)

Your mother was a Sister, as was your grandmother and your great-grandmother before her. You were born and raised among the Hippolytae and can recite the names and deeds of all your ancestors. Even Awakened outside your Craft have heard of your family. You receive a –2 to Social difficulties when interacting with members of your Craft or a –1 difficulty to such rolls when interacting with other Awakened. You benefit from this Merit as long as you remain in your family's good graces.

Blessing of Artemis (3 pt. Physical Merit)

You were born on Elaphebolia, the 26th of February and, as such, you have Artemis' grace. You are nimble and swift, as well as incredibly good with ranged weapons. When you find yourself in a sticky situation, you may call upon Artemis to receive +2 dice to all Dexterity rolls for the remainder of the scene. Once used, the Blessing of Artemis may not be used again until the following moonrise. You lose the benefits of this Merit if you displease or anger the goddess, though you can make amends through roleplaying or a quest.

Vessel of Themis (2 or 4 pt. Supernatural Flaw)

According to the ancient Greeks, Themis was a titan representing natural and divine order. She was also a powerful oracle. You bear a birthmark vaguely resembling either a sword or a pair of scales, and are particularly attuned to the suffering of other women. For 2 points, your character will be plagued by nightmares of unfamiliar women's experiences that leave you rattled and often disoriented. For 4 points, you will also exhibit physical proof of said experiences, like bruises or wounds. These nightmares leave you distracted and disoriented.

Playing this Flaw may be potentially triggering; you are advised to discuss limits and veils with your Storyteller and the rest of the players during character creation.

Rotes

Mark of the Huntress

(••• Life, •• Mind, •• Prime)

The Hippolytae have the utmost respect for mundane justice and rarely interfere with the judicial system of the unAwakened. That being said, they admit that, sometimes, said system turns a blind eye where minorities are concerned. The Sisters are not vigilantes, but they will do what they can to protect women from predators and abusers.

System: This rote allows the Hippolytae to call upon Artemis in order to preternaturally mark a target as dangerous. To the Awakened, the Mark of the Huntress looks like a bronze hoof on the marked one's forehead. The unAwakened aren't able to see it but are instinctively repelled by it and shy away from the target's presence. It should be said that, although this rote was originally created to save women from male predators, the Sisters won't hesitate to use it to help anyone in need.

This Effect is coincidental.

Break the Bonds

(••• Spirit)

Freedom is sacred. The Hippolytae have long-standing contracts with nymphs — elemental spirits of the woods and the waters. The Sisters protect the nymphs' natural habitats and, in return, the nymphs offer their assistance when a Sister finds herself bound, shackled, or otherwise held against her will.

System: Ropes turn slick with moss, bars rust away and, sometimes, as a last resort, merciful death might be extended to the Hippolytae. A Sister never surrenders to being held, after all. All conclaves have such contracts in place, though invocations differ from place to place.

This Effect can be either coincidental or vulgar, depending on the task performed by the nymph. The nymphs cannot affect creatures living in the material world. The exception to this is the Sister who summoned them, which is how the nymph might offer to take the Sister's life as a last resort.

One for All

(•• Correspondence, ••• Life, •• Prime)

The Sisters stand together, fight together, and die together. They share everything, including natal pains and battle wounds. The Hippolytae performing this rote bleed in a bowl and use that blood to bake a bread, which they then divide in equal portions. The bread needs to be fully consumed, and no crumbs are allowed to fall or go to waste if the rote is to take hold.

System: One for all is performed before combat or childbirth; it divides the pain and wounds inflicted among all participants, so that not one Sister suffers fully or alone.

This Effect is vulgar.

Wu Lung

For those who can commune with gods and spirits;
the men are called xi, and the women are called wu.
– Shuowen Jiezi, *a Chinese dictionary from 2nd Century CE*

The Unspeakable Horror

It was an unbearably hot and humid day mid-August. A woman in her late twenties dressed in a parka unsuitable for this weather stood in front of a residential tower block. A younger woman holding a large duffel bag followed her.

"Can we just get in already?" Wing wiped the sweat off her forehead, "How can you not feel hot in that parka?"

Susie pressed a number on the intercom.

The intercom cackled, "Who's there?"

"Hey Mr Wong, we are from the Wu Lung." replied Susie.

"Sorry I've made a mistake. Please go away." The intercom was cut off.

Susie held up a hand, "Hand me the luopan."

Wing searched the duffle bag for the requested geomancy compass.

The needle of the luopan pointed directly in front of them. "This place is definitely haunted."

The pair slipped in as someone left the building, and they noticed the striking pallor on the residents' faces, as if drained by supernatural forces.

They took the elevator up and headed for Mr Wong's flat.

"I told you not to come." Mr Wong's voiced was strained and scared. "If we don't talk about it, it won't hurt us. My son suggested we contact the Wu Lung, and it came for him."

"Mr Wong, we are trying to help. The evil spirit is clearly harming the residents of the building." Susie pleaded.

Mr Wong relented, "Flat 61B. Someone died there two weeks ago."

Susie and Wing made their way down the corridor towards the haunted apartment.

"Give me the Fu." Susie asked.

"Oh no." Wing rummaged through the duffle bag, "I forgot to pack the Fu paper, but I have got a pack of yellow sticky notes."

"That will do." Susie scribbled spells onto the sticky notes and stuck them near the entrance of the cursed flat.

As the pair entered the apartment, the door shut behind them with a bang.

Susie turned around and saw the evil spirit lifting Wing into the air, choking her by the neck. With the duffle bag dropped onto the floor, Susie swiftly withdrew the peachwood sword from within and lunged it at the evil spirit.

There was a flash of light as the spectral figure turned into dust, releasing Wing.

A while later, Susie and Wing were having egg tarts in a local cha chaan teng.

"So, the evil spirit was living on the residents' fear and silencing people who would talk about it?" said Wing as she took another bite of the egg tart.

"Yes, silencing the residents further terrorized them, and prevented them from coming together to find a solution." Susie sipped iced coffee through a straw.

"What if the whole city is being terrorized by a similar evil spirit, only much bigger?" Wing slid the rest of the egg tart into her mouth.

"Yea." Susie stared out of the window. She could just made out the painted-over graffiti on the opposite wall, which read Liberate Hong Kong.

History of the Wu Lung

Now that you've handled your first evil spirit, you'll be a proper initiate soon. It's time that I tell you the history of

our order. Mages from the Azure Dragon sect would have you believe that the Wu Lung has always stood for order and stability, and they are not entirely correct. You see, for centuries the Wu Lung had been run by misogynistic and power-hungry men, but this was not always the case.

The Dragon Witches

In our modern usage, the word Wu — Mou in Cantonese — is often associated with foreign mages, such as Western witches and wizards and Japanese shrine maidens. However, the word is actually rooted in ancient shamanistic magick. In ancient China, the word Wu initially referred to only female witches, and they had been around since the age of legends.

The Wu Lung can be traced back to a group of powerful mages dubbed Dragon Witches — Long Wu in Mandarin — due to their ability to commune with dragons. According to legends, the Dragon Witches were disciples of Jiutian Xuannu. Who is Jiutian Xuannu, you ask? She is the Lady of the Nine Heavens, a Chinese goddess of war, justice, and sex. She bestowed the Yellow Emperor with artifacts, military strategies, and divination techniques, so that he could best his rival Chiyou on the battlefield.

Like the later Wu Lung, the original Dragon Witches was a secretive organisation. Certain legendary figures belonged to the Dragon Witches, but their association with the organisation never made it to mainstream history. Fu Hou was one such Dragon Witch, who served as priestess and general for the Shang dynasty and married the king as one of his queen consorts. With her magick and military cunning, she led thirteen thousand soldiers to conquer the regions surrounding Shang. She is often depicted with her trusty axe in paintings and statues.

The Dragon Witches were also famous revolutionaries. In the 11th century BCE, during the late Shang Dynasty, the Dragon Witches led by Jiang Ziya took part in the uprising against the despot, King Zhou. They battled evil mages that served the tyrant and slew the nine-tailed fox demon Daji.

The Witch Dragons

Over the next few centuries, the Dragon Witches grew and spread across pre-unification China. In the Warring States period, they could be found in each of the states, advising the kings and helping the locals. At the time, no formal hierarchies existed within the Dragon Witches, and constant warfare pitted the mages against each other. In the third century BCE, a group of ambitious Dragon Witches in the state of Qin decided to call themselves the Witch Dragons, as a sign that they are 'dragons among men.' The term was romanized into 'Wu Lung' using the outdated Wade-Giles system and remains the official English name of our order today.

Despite the name, the Witch Dragons were mostly men at that point, and would restrict their female membership even further in later years — ugh, I know, fuck the patriarchy. The Wu Lung's ambition aligned to that of their lord King Zheng of Qin, who later became Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China. As Qin Shi Huang unified China, the Wu Lung mages unified the Dragon Witches under their rule. They convinced the emperor to burn magickal texts — not the Wu Lung's own writings, of course — and buried the mages who would not serve him, restricting practitioners to his service. In another account, mages who did not join the Wu Lung were given the impossible task of finding the elixir of life and were executed by the emperor when they failed. As you can see, the original Wu Lung was not gentle, and they destroyed more magickal knowledge than they had preserved.

Wu Lung in Imperial China

In imperial China, the Wu Lung remained a secret society of mages, and their members served as advisors to the emperors. During the Han dynasty, the Wu Lung Dong Zhongshu advised the emperor to adopt Confucian philosophy over other teachings and religions. Confucian philosophy emphasizes a rigid social order with the emperor on top and discourages the practice of mysticism. As Confucius once said, 'If one is not able to serve people, how can they serve the spirits?' This allowed the Wu Lung to monopolize magick and to curtail both hedge mages and influence from the Akashic Brotherhood. This would come back to haunt the Wu Lung later, leading to many bitter rivalries with other mage factions, but that's a story for another day.

The Wu Lung remained a small and secretive organization by keeping their recruitment numbers low. From the imperial examinations, they found candidates with magickal aptitude and the potential to be awakened, who they'd then recruit into the Wu Lung's ranks. Since the new recruits were already on their way to important positions in the government, it helped the Wu Lung secure more power in politics.

Even though the Wu Lung at the time was a hierarchical organization, its members did not always see eye to eye. In times of civil strife, the mages within the Wu Lung often took different sides, and some even hedged their bets on who would become the next emperor. In the Three Kingdom period, Zhuge Liang, Zuo Ci, and Guan

Lu were famous Wu Lung mages who each backed a different lord. Although individual Wu Lung mages might back the wrong lord, others invariably supported the victor, and so the Wu Lung as an organization lived on, serving equally the Mongol emperors in the Yuan dynasty and the Manchurian emperors in the Qing dynasty.

The Revolutionary Mages of Modern China

The Wu Lung became the organization we know today in the late Qing. The Boxer Rebellion drove a wedge between the Wu Lung and Empress Dowager Cixi when she listened to the scam magicians of the Yihequan instead of her Wu Lung advisers.

At the time, many young Wu Lung mages were already dissatisfied with how the organization was run and broke away from their imperial counterparts to join the revolution. The rebellious sect recruited anyone with potential in magick and lifted the ban against female mages. The introduction of Western ideas, science, and firearms had shifted the consensual reality in China. Though some of the Wu Lung mages did take part in guerilla warfare against the Qing army, they could not lead armies into battle like their forebears and were relegated to assisting the revolutionaries in secret.

Lin Gengbai was Awakened and recruited into the Wu Lung by the age of 13. He was very vocal against Confucianism and what he considered the Craft's outmoded traditions. Two years later, he joined Tongmenghui, the resistance organization that later overthrew the Qing government, bringing many young Wu Lung mages with him. The 1911 revolution took place when Lin Gengbai was only 17, and his sect of young Wu Lung mages assisted the revolutionaries and battled the old Wu Lung in secret. When the revolution was over, some of the old Wu Lung mages joined Lin Gengbai's new Wu Lung and supported Sun Yat-sen as the leader of China. A few Wu Lung mages that still clung onto imperial rule supported Yuan Shikai and later worked with the Japanese invaders to reinstate Puyi, the last Qing emperor. Lin Gengbai divined the death of Yuan Shikai, who met his end soon after he crowned himself the new emperor of China.

At the time, many revolutionaries were influenced by Marxism, and so were the young mages in the Wu Lung. There were many parallels between Sun Yat-sen's revolution in China and Lenin's revolution in Russia, and Sun Yat-sen allied with Russia and worked with the Chinese Communists in a bid to defeat the Northern warlords and reunite China. Alas, too many people view Sun Yat-sen with rose tinted glasses and overlook the atrocities he committed in the name of reunification.

After Sun Yat-sen's death, his successor Chiang Kai-shek began purging the Communists, killing thousands and expelling many more leftists from the Nationalist party. Lin Gengbai, disillusioned by the event, withdrew himself from politics and Wu Lung leadership in mainland China. Eventually, he headed to Hong Kong and led the Wu Lung branch in the British Colony, until he was murdered by Japanese soldiers during the occupation.

The Civil War and Beyond

The revolutionary Wu Lung mages of China were at a crossroads. Should they support the government that started the initial revolution, or should they join the new revolution of the Communists? The two sides could not reach a compromise, and the Wu Lung was once again fractured in two, with one branch supporting Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and the other supporting the Communists. The Nationalists and Communists fought a civil war until the Second World War. The Wu Lung mages from both sides helped broker a truce to repel the Japanese invaders. Peace was fragile after WWII, and the civil war soon started again; the Communists emerged victorious, and the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan along with their Wu Lung supporters. If you've been paying attention, that leaves us with three Wu Lung branches: in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. There were also Wu Lung mages in overseas Chinese communities, but they don't factor into our story right now.

After Mao Zedong gained power in China, he turned the party into his own personal cult. There were constant witch hunts for "rightists" and "counter-revolutionaries," where people were publicly shamed, incarcerated, sent to labour camps, or outright killed, and Mao Zedong's hare-brained schemes caused famines and starved tens of millions of Chinese people to death. Unlike the past Chinese rulers, Mao Zedong did not heed the advice of the Wu Lung mages. When some of the Wu Lung mages wanted to install a more democratic leader, they were swiftly taken out and executed. Some suggested that Mao Zedong had already established a group of Technocractic mages that were only loyal to him and the Communist Party. The surviving Wu Lung mages on the mainland fled to Hong Kong, joining the local branch that was founded by Lin Gengbai decades earlier — reducing the Craft to two Wu Lung branches.

The Wu Lung in Taiwan initially supported the Chinese Nationalist Party's one-party rule on the island; during the White Terror period in Taiwan, hundreds of thousands of people were killed or jailed for political dissent. Over the next few decades, the old mages died off and young mages eventually took over. The young Wu Lung mages supported the democratic movements at the time, with the island finally gaining democracy in the nineties. Today, Wu Lung in Taiwan support many progressive causes such as gender equality and LGBT rights.

When Lin Gengbai first set up the Wu Lung branch in Hong Kong, it was meant to be an organisation for good. He wanted the mages to use their magick to help the locals, to protect them against exploitative industries and a foreign ruling class that does not care for the commoners. However, in the decades that followed, greed corrupted

On romanization of Chinese names and terms

Although written Chinese is standardized, there are many different spoken languages in China that are not mutually intelligible. Mandarin is the official spoken language of China, and Cantonese is spoken in parts of southern China including Hong Kong. The same written word can sound drastically different in the two languages. Wade-Giles is an old romanization system for Mandarin Chinese, which is the system used in a lot of older English literature. Pinyin is the official Mandarin romanization system that is used in modern English literature. There are a number of romanization systems for Cantonese, but Cantonese names in Hong Kong are often romanized in a way that prioritize ease of English pronunciation over accuracy. Also, tones are required to indicate an accurate pronunciation of a word in Chinese, which are usually not present in romanization. Whenever a Chinese term is mentioned in this chapter, either the most relevant or the most commonly accepted form is used. With regards to names of people, a person's family name goes before their given name in Chinese, and we keep this order unless they use an English given name.

It should be noted that the word 'Wu Lung' uses the Wade-Giles romanization system, and the mages have decided to keep it as the official English name. (It is not an uncommon practice outside of mainland China. In fact, Taiwan has kept the Wade-Giles romanized version for many proper nouns.) The word is Wulong in Mandarin Pinyin and is pronounced Moulung in Cantonese.

the Wu Lung mages. They provided their services to the highest bidders, many of whom were business moguls and triad bosses. The British colonial government did not believe in Chinese magick and was not aware of the Wu Lung's existence. After the handover, those mages distanced themselves from the triads and started taking contracts from the government. In the past decade, the young mages in the Wu Lung formed the Yellow Dragon sect — Wong Lung in Cantonese and Huang Long in Mandarin — to serve the people instead of those in power. We are the Yellow Dragons of the Wu Lung.

That's the history of the Wu Lung, and there will be a quiz next week — just kidding. I have to go now, or I'll be late for the induction of new recruits.

The Wu Lung in Hong Kong

Welcome to the Wu Lung. My name is Susanna Ng, and I am your instructor for this induction session. You don't have to call me Sifu or Ms. Ng; Susanna or just Susie is fine. We are not that formal here. Wu Lung is an organisation of mages that traces its roots to the witches in ancient China, and today we have members in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities. Our main mission is to preserve Chinese magickal traditions and use that knowledge for good. I understand you have some questions about Wu Lung as an organisation, and I will answer them the best I can.

Recruitment Process

You are here because you passed our online magickal aptitude test. The test is designed so that only someone with magickal potential can find it. We used to recruit new members at the local temples, but we have adopted the online system since the turn of the millennium. Can you image finding young people near a temple nowadays outside of school trips? The online test allows us to reach more potential mages than ever before. Outside of the online test, our secret Wu Lung societies at the eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong hold recruitment drives. There, student members can meet and practice their magick, and they also keep an eye out for other students with potential for Awakening. We believe that young people are our future, and we do whatever we can to help train a new generation of mages, unlike the Azure Dragons.

The Yellow Dragon Sect

We belong to the Yellow Dragon sect, the main Wu Lung sect in Hong Kong. Wu Lung split into two sects in 2014, when the young mages gained power and the middle-aged mages broke away to form the Azure Dragon sect. It's our version of millennials and Gen Z versus Boomers and Gen X. Most of the elder mages born during or before World War II have withdrawn from Wu Lung politics, but those who remain still hold power in the Azure Dragons.

The Yellow Dragon sect believes that magick should be used for good, and that Wu Lung mages have a duty to aid the common citizens in Hong Kong. On the other hand, the Azure Dragon sect believes in stability, and their magick is used to aid the political elites and the rich. The Yellow Dragon sect is the most numerous but most of its members are young and less experienced. While the Azure Dragon sect counts fewer mages, they are often older and more experienced. Of course, not all young mages join the Yellow Dragon sect, nor do all the middle-aged mages join the Azure Dragon sect. There are progressive Boomer and Gen X mages who allied themselves with the Yellow Dragon sect, and there are young mages from affluent families who think the Azure Dragon sect would protect their interests and privileges. There are also mages who joined a sect out of loyalty to their mentor and friends.

During the 2019 protests, many mages of the Yellow Dragon sect took to the streets and assisted the protesters with magick, concealing them when the cops moved in. When the cops fired teargas canisters into the protesters, we summoned gusts of wind to blow the gas away from civilians. When the cops kettled the demonstrators, we opened another way out with magick. A few mages from the Azure Dragon sect served as advisors to the government and the police, but most of them were just being loud and obnoxious about their displeasure towards the 'unruly' protesters. Our nickname for the Azure Dragon is the Mandarin word Xi, the archaic word for male witches, to signify that they are a group of out-of-touch, mostly middle-aged men, and to show where their true loyalty lies.

Egalitarian and Democratic

As I mentioned, the Yellow Dragon sect is a group of young mages, and we do not have a strict hierarchy here. We treat each other equally regardless of their experience. Most Chinese mages tend to call magick fashu/faatseot, and we prefer to call ourselves fashi/faatsi (mage) or shushi/seotsi (practitioner of the arts) rather than wushi/mousi. Experienced mages in Wu Lung can gain the title tianshi/tinsi, which means 'heavenly master.'

In the Wu Lung, mages treat each other like a giant family. Core to that is the mentor/student relationship. Each new mage is assigned an experienced mage as their

mentor. This apprenticeship can last for years, sometimes decades, and students studying under the same mentor are encouraged to support each other in their studies.

The Wu Lung is led by a council of mages, and council members are democratically elected in the Yellow Dragon sect. The council is responsible for everyday operation of the sect, allocating resources and meting out disciplinary actions.

The Five Arts

The study of Chinese magick can be broken down into five areas, called the Five Arts. The first one is the art of xian, which is the type of magick you see in TV and movies. Xian is a catchall term for minor deities, and humans can attain xianhood and immortality through spiritual and physical training. No modern humans have achieved immortality as far as I know, but some of the Wu Lung elders are over a century old and look only half their age. The art of xian covers a broad area of magick, with spellcasting and martial arts falling under it. The second art is the art of medicine, which combines traditional Chinese medicine with healing magick. Chinese magick has a big focus on divination, and the other three arts are all concerned with methods of prediction. They are astrology, geomancy (feng shui), and reading of palms and faces. If one can foresee the outcome of a fight, they can only pick those battles they can win.

Deities

Lots of Chinese deities are worshipped in Hong Kong, though 'deity' can be a very loose term, as the subject of worship can simply be historical figures without any supernatural powers when they were alive. Wu Lung mages believe they can borrow powers from the deities by performing certain rituals.

Wong Tai Sin, a Taoist hermit who achieved xianhood, has a reputation for answering anyone's prayers and specializes in miracles of healing. Tin Hau (meaning Queen of Heaven), also called Mazu in Taiwan, is worshiped as the guardian of the sea with powers to command the weather. Che Kung, a general in the Southern Song Dynasty who escorted the emperor to Hong Kong during the Mongol conquest, has been worshipped as a deity of protection since his death. Guan Yu was a famous general in the Three Kingdoms period and is worshipped as a deity of loyalty and righteousness. Interestingly, Guan Yu is a popular deity among both cops and triad members. Many Chinese mages believe that they can improve their spells by invoking the name of Taishang Laojun. He is believed to be one of Taoism's highest trinity, the Three Pure Ones, and took the human form of Laozi, Taoism's founder.

En Yuan (Gratitude and Grievance)

Some mages still have outdated views of the Wu Lung based on history books that are more than a century old. The modern Wu Lung has been forging alliances with progressive mage groups across the globe and fighting against bullies who want to control the world with magick.

The Disparate Alliance

The Wu Lung has allied itself with the Disparate Alliance, standing in solidarity to other oppressed mage groups. Like the other Crafts in the alliance, the Wu Lung is against the Technocracy, but doesn't like how the Traditions are trying to speak for all mages.

The Akashic Brotherhood

There might have been rivalry between the Wu Lung and the Akashic Brotherhood centuries ago, but the two factions are strong allies nowadays and will come to each other's aid. After all, both our magickal traditions can be traced back to Eastern belief systems that co-evolved alongside one another.

The Technocracy

There are technomancers in the Chinese government who help the state with surveillance and the quenching of dissent. They are everything the young mages in Wu Lung stand against. Lately, the Technocracy has used magickal surveillance to hunt down cells of Wu Lung mages.

The Kahu

Hawaii has a large Chinese population, and an overseas Wu Lung branch is set up there. The Kahu not only shares our hatred for the Technocracy, but also historical trauma suffered from Western colonization. We are working to build a portal between two Chinese temples in Hong Kong and Hawaii to allow refugees to pass through, but it will require magickal materials and powerful mages to pull it off.

The Dream of Nanke

The Dream of Nanke is a Chinese fable about a man who falls asleep under a tree and dreams of living an entirely different life before waking up where he was. Through dreams, we may catch glimpses of paths not taken, but who are we to tell the difference between dreams and realities?

Dreams of Order. The mage world is very different after the Technocracy has won. The Wu Lung was absorbed by the Technocracy and became a multinational technology corporation headquartered in Shenzhen. In the present, a group of Wu Lung employees in Hong Kong have started an underground resistance against

their parent company.

Dreams of Storms. The Avatar Storm has severed connections to the Otherworlds, which means mages can no longer contact their deities and ancestors. However, by combining their memories of the old gods and knowledge of pop culture, some Wu Lung mages will new deities into existence, albeit temporarily.

Dreams of Dragons. Deities are real and they walk the earth, including dragons which the Dragon Witches once communed with. The Technocracy are attempting to capture one of the dragons, and it is up to the Wu Lung to stop them. There are also dragon veins — a type of ley line in Chinese mysticism — that grant great magickal power, and mages battle for control over them.

Characters and Traits

One of the Wu Lung's main missions is to catalogue and preserve Chinese magick, and with roots stretching back millennia, there are diverse practices that come from different paradigms. There are flashy, faith-based magick — related to the art of xian — that is similar to what you see in popular action flicks, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. The bulk of Chinese magick is about studying patterns in the world and predicting what will happen next, not unlike science.

Paradigms

A Mechanistic Cosmos (**M20**, p. 568), Divine Order and Earthly Chaos (**M20**, p. 569) and Ancient Wisdom is the Key (**M20 Book of Secrets**, p. 190) are core paradigms for the Wu Lung. A Wu Lung mage believes that ancient knowledge teaches of a divine order, that although things may seem chaotic from the outside, they can be divided into parts and categorized. There are a number of different systems, with wuxing (the five elements) and bagua (the eight signs) being the most popular. In wuxing, one of the five elements is assigned to a subject of interest, and by comparing two subjects' elements, one can infer whether they enhance each other or cancel each other out. Bagua is a similar system using eight signs, with more nuanced interactions between them.

The Wu Lung also believes a version of A World of Gods and Monsters (**M20**, p. 568), but only gods and not monsters. In general, a Wu Lung mage believes that all the Chinese deities are real, including any minor deities and a person's ancestors. There is a primal energy, better known as qi, that flows through all things. Yes, evil spirits exist, but they are more the exception rather than the rule.

On Chinese faiths

It is difficult to entirely separate religion and culture. Chinese folk beliefs shaped the religions in China, and both inform the Chinese traditions. Taoism and Han Buddhism are the two main faiths in China. To many Chinese people, Confucianism is a system of thought and philosophy that emphasize social cohesion, and it was a state religion in imperial China rather than a personal religion practised in everyday life. Taoism is an extension of Chinese folk beliefs, bringing ancient deities and legends into canon and constructing a system of thought around them. Han Buddhism is Mahayana Buddhism with Chinese characteristics, with deities taking on Chinese names and appearances. A typical temple would be known for the worshipped deity rather than the doctrine, and a common Chinese person would hold a mixture of beliefs and worship deities from either or both religions. The Wu Lung does not adhere to a specific religious sect, and their magick is derived from Chinese folk beliefs.

Practices

In ancient wisdom, there is little distinction between magick and science, which we nowadays view as weird science (**M20**, p. 568), which also extends to alchemy (**M20**, p. 573) and medicine work (**M20**, p. 581). The Wu Lung also practices high ritual magick (**M20**, p. 578), where the rituals come from an understanding of ancient wisdom.

Mages in the Wu Lung believe one can extend their lifespan by practicing magick, which is a form of invigoration (**M20 Book of Secrets**, p. 201), with medicine and martial arts (**M20**, p. 580) being part of it.

Many Wu Lung mages also practice a type of god-bonding (**M20 Book of Secrets**, p. 201), where they invite a deity to possess their body to boost their Attributes and Abilities, sometimes ceding their consciousness to said deity.

Instruments

To many Wu Lung mages, books and charts on geomancy and astrology are major instruments for those who focus on them. Potions and brews play a big part, both with traditional medicine and with alchemy. Writing and language is important in the creation of Fu, and offerings of incense and food are used in many of the Wu Lung rituals.

Affinity Spheres

Wu Lung mages focusing on ancient sciences like astrology and geomancy, that teach of the primal energy binding all things, find Correspondence and Prime beneficial. If a Wu Lung mage wants to take advantage of their bonds to the gods and focus on their faith-based magick, Spirit is the gateway to fostering such ties.

Concepts

The Yellow Dragon sect of the Wu Lung consists of many young mages who rail against injustice permeating the lands in which they dwell.

Po Po (Grandma)

Born during WWII in a village in Guangdong, you came to Hong Kong to escape from the famine during The Great Leap Forward and seek a better future. When you got here, Hong Kong was ruled by a colonial government rife with corruption who treated workers as nothing more than capital. In 1967, loyalists to the Communist government co-opted the local labor movement, killing innocent civilians and marring the public perception of trade unions in Hong Kong for the following decades. You discovered your affinity to magick and joined the Wu Lung in Hong Kong, hoping to use your gifts to help the local people, but you were disappointed by the Wu Lung leadership at the time, who sided with the rich businessmen and the triads. You defied the council's wishes and offered your pro bono services to the poor, and was treated as a pariah by your fellow mages. In the past decade, you noticed a shift in the opinion of young mages, who are more empathetic and perceptive of social issues. You realize that young people are the future, and that only the young can save the Wu Lung and Hong Kong. You supported the young mages in overtaking the Wu Lung leadership, and now they affectionately call you Po Po (grandma) and treat you as one of their own.

Young Dragon

Your family was not particularly religious, but you attended a strict Catholic girl's school in Hong Kong as a kid—while only 16% of the population are Christians, over half of the schools in Hong Kong are run by them. In school, you were told that Chinese religions and rituals are merely superstitions, and that Christian beliefs better fit the modern, scientific world. You always struggled in school as a kid with ADHD, where forty kids were fit into a single classroom and forced to sit and listen for hours. You were expected to partake in after school activities like cram school, music lessons, and sports, with little time left for your own childhood. You barely passed the public exams and managed to get into university. At university, you finally had time to explore your own interests and connect with your cultural roots. You started researching Chinese mysticism and got inducted into Wu Lung. Magick was your true calling; you learned the mystical arts quickly, and soon started mentoring other young mages.

Wayward Son

You were born into a family of Wu Lung mages. Your parents were both boomer mages that held positions on the council, and they were close friends with a number of government officials as well. When the young mages took over the Wu Lung, you followed your parents to join the Azure Dragon sect. You can't help but see that the Yellow Dragon sect has a point. The government does not have any accountability, and they don't care about the lives of common citizens in Hong Kong. There is the Chinese idiom 'Helping King Zhou in his oppression,' and that is exactly what the Azure Dragon sect is doing. You are torn between your conscience and loyalty to your family. Your friends in the Yellow Dragons have made it clear they'd welcome you.

Merits and Flaws

Many Merits and Flaws from **M20** and its supplements are appropriate for Wu Lung mages. Here are some extra Merits and Flaws based on Chinese star signs in Zi Wei Dou Shu (Purple Star/Polaris Astrology).

Wenqu (2 pt. Social Merit)

The Chinese name for Megrez. It is believed that a person born under this star is more likely to succeed in their artistic pursuits. The art they create is of a higher quality and can touch people's hearts. Add +2 dice to any Expression rolls dealing with poetry, fiction, or spoken word, as well as artistic Crafts rolls.

Wuqu (2 pt. Resources Merit)

The Chinese name for Mizar. Under the system of wuxing, its element is metal/gold. Persons born under the star accumulate wealth more easily than others. Your financial investments often return a tidy profit. Once per story, treat your Resources as if they were 2 higher or expend Resources without losing any dots.

Zuofu (2 pt. Social Merit)

The Chinese name for Alcor. This star represents social luck. Persons born under Zuofu have an increased chance of meeting people who would aid them. Once

per session, at your request if not among hostiles, the Storyteller introduces a character whom you can win over with bribes, social rolls, or whatever else is appropriate. Their aid is never a guarantee, nor is it always free, but you have a fair chance at earning it.

Dijie (2 pt. Resources Flaw)

The star of calamity. Its effect is opposite to that of Wuqu, with a person born under the Dijie more likely to lose money. Your resources can never rise above 1.

Qingyang (1 pt. Social Flaw)

The star of the raised goat, which is a bad omen. Opposite to Zuofu, a person born under Qingyang is prone to offend people they meet. Your social rolls to making a good first impression suffer a –2 dice penalty.

Rotes

Godly Possession: Hua Tuo

(•• Spirit)

The mage channels the god of medicine into themselves.

System: You increase your Ability in medicine by +2 for one roll.

This Effect is coincidental.

Godly Possession: Guan Yu

(••• Spirit)

The mage channels the famous martial god from the Three Kingdoms period into themselves.

System: For an unarmed or melee attack, you either enhance bashing damage to lethal or lethal damage to aggravated.

This Effect is vulgar.

Qimen Dunjia

(••• Correspondence)

By combining wuxing (the five elements) and bagua (the eight signs), one can manipulate the battlefield to their advantage. The Yellow Emperor used this geomantic technique to defeat Chiyou, and Jiang Ziya further developed the technique for use against King Zhou's army. Zhuge Liang was another famous user of Qimen Dunjia, who applied it to trap an entire army of Cao Cao's forces.

System: This Effect can be used offensively or defensively. Offensively, a mage uses the technique to find the perfect position to enter a fight, lowering the difficulty of combat rolls by –1. Defensively, one can arrange barricades and obstacles to guide enemies into unfavorable positions, increasing the difficulty of combat rolls for your opponents by +1. This Effect lasts one scene.

This Effect is coincidental.

Specialty Items

Peachwood sword

A sword made from the humble wood of the Prunus persica species. In Chinese legends, peaches are believed to be holy fruits eaten by the gods, and its wood can be used to ward off evil. Chinese exorcists often carry swords made of peachwood. To other mortals, it is just a wooden short sword that inflicts bashing damage. When fighting supernatural foes, a mage can spend one Willpower to change the damage type to aggravated for the scene.

Fu

Fu are traditionally rectangular pieces of yellow paper with spells written on them in a fancy script. The most common spells are wards and seals against evil spirits, but other spells can be used, too. A mage can also burn a Fu and mix its ash with water, so that a person can ingest the mixture and be imbued with the spell's effect. Young mages have been replacing traditional paper with yellow sticky notes in a pinch, and the efficacy remains.

Tan

A makeshift altar that can be fashioned by a mage to enhance their rituals. The 'altar' is commonly a table covered with yellow tablecloth. On top of it, a mage places Fu, incense, magickal flags, and offerings to the spirits (which can be fruits, roast chicken, or pork). A tan allows mages to perform a ritual with all rolls at -1 difficulty, or begin an extended ritual with 2 banked successes before the first roll, or reroll a single botched roll. The player chooses one of these effects before the ritual begins.

Chapter Three: The Outsiders

I just work here.
— Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure (1989)

Even in a room full of outcasts, someone is the odd one out. The outsiders would be elated to see the Disparate experiment survive — but they just don't think it *will*. There's too many burned bridges coupled with a history of unshakable self-reliance to think the alliance will, or even can, hold. Who knows though — they may happily be proven wrong.

From the Outside In

It's not entirely the outsiders' fault for their status on the fringe of the Disparate experiment. In some cases, negative reputations formed hundreds of years ago still stick like lasting stains. In others, good old fashioned prejudice is sufficient to keep the outsiders away from the middle. Despite their cynicism, however, many a mage from one of the outer Crafts looks enviously at the forerunners and middlers and wonders "Why not me?"

In truth, when it comes to individual capability, even the most stuck-up Hermetic mage would be hard pressed to deny an accomplished Orphan their due. A Child of Knowledge may be a little on the strange side compared to the Ngoma and Templars, but the forerunners observe acutely that hard circumstances and tough living can fashion a diamond from coal. They therefore watch the outsiders and have the arrogance to select this one or that as representatives for the Disparate Alliance, "rewarding" them for overcoming such adversity.

This treatment only hardens the outsiders even more. How dare some Hollow One tell them they do or don't deserve this? What do the Taftâni truly know of being at the limits of acceptability? What punishment have they endured that they didn't bring down upon themselves?

Therefore, the outsiders exist in a state of to-and-fro'. There are many mages who would see them included, included from within their ranks. But these Crafts have reputations and attitudes, and it's hard to escape either.

BATA'A

The job of the conscious is to make the unconscious conscious.

— Kwame Ture

Wait! Don't touch that dial! Well, you couldn't if you tried.

We know what happened when your brother got pulled over by the police for no reason, as usual. We felt it when the Ancestors spoke to you as that cop was escalating the situation, looking to put a notch on his belt and claim it was self-defense.

But his scheme didn't exactly go to plan, did it? When the Ancestors took over, and you handed his ass to him and got away with it? Man, that was some next-level Freedom Rider shit! Sweetback ain't got nothin' on you!

How did it feel when you first "woke up?" We don't mean when you rolled out of bed this morning. We don't mean when you first became aware of social injustice. Nah. How did it feel when you first stumbled onto the Fork in the Road? What was it like when you Turned the Path, shifted from right to left and found yourself at the intersection between the Ancestors and the living?

Your third eye has been opened, and now you stand in the center of the Yawa Cross. Someone has to school you on how to navigate this new life. You need to know the ins and outs, the outs and ins. We can't have you out in these streets butt-nekkid and ashy. You're Bata'a now, family. We won't abandon you. You're part of the Revolution, maybe the most important part. You represent the future.

We're on the Air!

We stand at the Yawa Cross, the Fork in the Road and the turning of the Path. In the center of the Cross, we make the offering at the Four Corners.

We pour champagne for Papa Agwe and ask him for direction, inspiration, and guidance.

We offer rum and gunpowder to Ezili Dantour and ask her to guide our hand in our ongoing struggle for justice.

We light a cigar and pour a glass of wine for that cruel bastard, Baron Criminel. We ask him to collect his people, the murderers and thieves, and drag them back to the hell whence they came.

And, lastly, we offer that saucy bitch, Guede Nibo, their cigar and rum as well so that they may give voice to the dead whose bodies could not be found.

We do this in the name of our ancestors, the Seven Clans Made One. We do this for the future so that one day, our children may be free.

We are the revolution. We are Bata'a.

Asé, family! Welcome to the Ring Shout: Podcast of the Revolution. The Ronde des Ames, or Chain of Souls, picked up that there was a new child of the Revolution in the family. So, with this episode, we're gonna switch it up a bit. We'll be breaking down the Seven Books of Moses, the oral tome of the Bata'a, with a special mix put together by our brother, DJ Crossroads. Some of these joints you may know, some may be new to your ears. But, if your ears have been tuned to the Drums, all of these tracks are gonna hit different.

Now, let's get this party started.

Track 01. Umi Says (Book of the Self)

They say that when a man faces his destiny, the destiny ends, and he becomes the man that he really is.

– Yasiin Bey

Becoming "woke" is never a peaceful act. It is born from pain and anger. How did you handle it? Did it make you bitter? Did it make you righteous? What are you going to do now that you know that which you can never unknow?

This is the Self speaking to you right now. This is you in complete concert with who you are physically, spiritually, and mentally. You stand in the ultimate truth of who you are. You are now completely free, and that freedom gives you power. You now have the ability to work in concert with the forces of creation itself to change reality.

What will you do with that power? Are you going to be out for revenge, to get all those muddahfuggahs who did you wrong, did us wrong? Or are you gonna use what you got in the cause of justice, of making sure that all are held accountable, to get us all to the Promised Land?

That beat is hitting different now, ain't it? You hear them, the voices of the Ancestors, and they have a lot of opinions on the matter. The question is, which voices are you going to listen to, to guide you in this new life?

Your Umi said shine your light on the world. So shine it bright for the world to see.

Track 02. Slave to the Rhythm (Book of the Body)

I can't be bought and people hate that. Everybody has their price – but not me.

– Grace Jones

Then: The Black Seam

The ache—that deep, dull, throbbing pain going bone deep—permeates your soul. That's the pain of our people ripped from their homes. That's the agony of surviving a brutal journey to a foreign land. That's the degradation of being worked to death like a pack mule or treated brutally like a piece of meat to satisfy the carnal desires of cruel men. That's the torture of still being deemed 3/5 of a person, a beast to be tamed, beaten, and hunted. That's the sum total of the blood, sweat and tears of our people.

Emmett Till. Abner Louima. Trayvon Martin. Sandra Bland. George Floyd. Breanna Taylor.

There are too many names to say, but we must say them. We must remember them. They are the souls that cry for reparation. Their bodies were cast upon the Oppressor's pyre. They were the kindling that stoked the flames of industry and tyranny. If the Oppressor has its way, we would all be curb stomped into oblivion. If they can't control our bodies, then they will destroy them. Why? Because we are the greatest threat. We are the truth that they can't deny. We are the Reckoning and they ain't ready for that action.

The Body holds all of our pain. It is also the container of our greatest strength. Pressure creates diamonds, and we Bata'a are the most precious jewels. We have not only endured, not only survived, but we will be triumphant. We will thrive.

Bata'a magick is a physical act. It is a magick of resistance and liberation. We Bata'a practice it in plain sight because fools think that we're invisible. They ain't checking for us. The Oppressor is too busy trying to erase our existence and claim everything we created as their own. That's why they're always shocked when we shine, when succeed in the game they rigged so that we would fail.

Now: 'Til the Whistle Blows

Our magick is blue collar. Bata'a are not afraid to get our hands dirty in working the art. We work the roots. We work the earth. Our art is sacred, and the vévés, evidence of our métier, can be found everywhere... That is, if you know where to look.

We work our craft with intent. We can build and we can destroy. We can heal and we can poison. We serve *les Mystères* liquor, food, and the vices of their choice to curry their favor and gain their assistance. We build altars in our homes so that they may have a place to stay when they visit the physical plane. We offer our bodies to the Loa, to be the ridden Chwal, as they work their magick through us.

You're beginning to catch the polyrhythms, the syncopation of it all. You're beginning to move — really move. You're feeling it. We can tell. The Drums are really speaking to you, and now you're starting to understand the language. You are becoming one with the rhythm.

Finding Your Mojo

Now, what is the Body? We are not talking about you in this moment. The Body is not your arms or legs. It's not your nerves, muscles, bones, arms, nor skin. The Body is your Tobe, the **Mojo Bag**. You must carry the Body with you at all times. It's your sign of office, your passport to the Other Side and the access to your craft.

It was the Mojo of **Sandy Jenkins** who guided **Frederick Douglass** on his mission to free all men. The Gris-Gris of **Gullah Jack** gave **Nat Turner** strength in his fight for liberation, and it was the Conjure that delivered **William Webb** from bondage.

In other words, the Mojo Bag is a symbol of freedom. It tells the world that you are "free from the gaze." The Bata'a does not let others define who we are. We walk our own path.

Track 03. We Live in Brooklyn, Baby (Book of the Clan)

The true beauty of music is that it connects people. It carries a message, and we, the musicians, are the messengers.

– Roy Ayers

Alright. There's a group of cats out there who call themselves "experts" on where Black folk in the "New World" come from. They claim that they are archeologists, scholars that have unearthed our hidden history. They claim to hold the knowledge of identity, the truth that the Oppressor denied us to keep us in bondage. They "reclaim" Egypt from the Oppressor as the absolute center of the Motherland. They peddle their "barbershop academia" as gospel.

Let's keep it a buck. They're charlatans, and we call them Fauxteps. They're just a bunch of poverty pimps and familiars using liberation as a janky hustle to get their coins. They don't know shit about the Seven Clans Made One.

Where You Come From

First of all, the Clans of the Diaspora didn't come from Egypt. Every African descendant living in the Americas and the Caribbean comes from seven clans in the Western and Central parts of the Motherland.

We are the Kongo, the **Igbo**, the **Akan**, the **Mande**, the **Yoruba**, the **Fon**, and the **Ewe**.

These were the majority of people that were separated by abduction or sold as spoils of war. These were the seven clans torn from their homes, language, and culture. These were the seven clans brought on boats, thrust into a New World, and forced onto plantations. The only link between these people was the shared traditions and beliefs from the Motherland that they carried in their hearts and minds.

They would share traditions, spirits, and gods with the other clans while hiding the practice of their faith in plain sight. The people of the Seven Clans would use the faith forced upon them, the beliefs of the Oppressor, to befuddle and delude their cruel masters. They would all be unified by the Drums, the universal communicator that would make the Seven Clans one — a new African for a new world.

This merging of faith systems, unified by the sign of the Yawa Cross and the celebration called the Ring Shout, empowered the enslaved to rise up against the slave masters in Jamaica, Haiti, Barbados, and other island nations. It fortified the new Africans in what would become the United States, inspiring and empowering such revolutionaries as Denmark Vassey and Nat Turner to violent, dynamic action. It also provided more subtle means of resistance. The use of poultices and poisons, or the taking of a lock of hair to bind a man's soul to a doll, gave the enslaved weapons to rise up against their enemies.

These Seven Clans Made One, The Clan of the Diaspora, are the authors of the Seven Books of Moses. They would become the Bata'a.

Keep Your Crew Tight

Now, we Bata'a like to move in small groups. They're flexible and easy to adapt in any situation. Your local crew, or house, is called a **Creyente**. Think of them as your "ride-or-dies," your "Day Ones," your chosen family. You might have already found them, or you may still be looking for your crew. Don't worry. The rhythm of the Drums will bring you and your people together.

A Creyente is led by an elder member of the Bata'a. Keep in mind that the title of your elder is gonna be different depending on which craft brings you to the fold. For example, they may want you to call them Santeros (or Santeria) and Houngan (or Mambo). Each title holds the same respect among the Bata'a. A Creyente is a tight family numbering at least three, but no more than seven members. Each member of a Creyente has two identities, or Names: their "government" name and the name given to them by a Bata'a elder, taking the name of their Creyente as a surname. Having two names is the acceptance of the dual consciousness, the multiple faces we must wear in order to navigate the world.

Our enemies must not know how deep we roll. We function on the local level because our craft is fluid and open to improvisation. There are many styles to Bata'a magick. We had to remix and remaster the ancient faiths with other regional magicks we picked up from the Ally and the Oppressor (i.e., Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santeria, Brazilian Candomblé, Mississippi Hoodoo, etc.). Because of that, there are more Bata'a walking the earth than they can hope to know.

We live in Brooklyn. We live in New Orleans. We live in Mississippi, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Haiti, Cuba... We live in the world. We're gonna make it, baby.

Track 04. - Chameleon (Book of the Soul)

I knew that I had never heard any jazz players really play funk like the funk I had been listening to. Instead of getting jazz cats who knew how to play funk, I got funk cats who knew how to play jazz. At a certain point I felt the need to play music that was more tethered, something that was more earthy. It was certainly a new approach for me, and I didn't realize that I was carving out new territory.

– Herbie Hancock

Ah, yes. This is the first "deep" cut in the DJ Crossroads set. It isn't deep because there ain't no lyrics to it. Nah, it's fluid. It shifts, transforms, and is transmogrified. It starts funky, becomes smooth, esoteric and existential, then returns back to earth grounded by the funk. Hancock's ***Headhunters*** defined Fusion. For the Bata'a, this is the quintessential track, the perfect metaphor for the Soul.

The Bata'a are chameleons. We have to be in order to survive. We exist in two states of being: physical and spiritual. The Soul is our truest self — vulnerable, yet imbued with great promise. It is the Soul which houses the aptitude for the art. It is the Soul that communes with the Ancestors, and it is the Soul that will define your path when you stand in the center of the Yawa Cross.

Remember, we come from the Seven Clans Made One. Each Clan brought something to the Bata'a craft. In the center of the Yawa Cross, your Soul will call out to the Ancestors and demand to know its people, its name, its Clan. The Ancestors of your Clan will respond. But it is the Clan that resonates with your Soul that dictates how your Bata'a craft will manifest.

Bonus Track - Hanging on a String (Contemplating)

We're all contemplating. We have less control than ever and increasing concern about the state of the world. We're all at loose ends, each one of us hanging by a string.

– Ari Rosenschein

Did you think that this reality was the only one to exist? Think again. This is only one thread in the tapestry of possibility. The world of *les Mystères* is very different than ours. They move in other ways. Time, space, alternate routes, *les Mystères* know them all and have helped the Bata'a navigate through some extremely dangerous territory.

Then: The Symphony

Dig it: the Bata'a, at one point, were almost extinct. Too many of us forgot our history and the meaning of the Struggle. We began to ignore the Drum and, instead, followed the clarion call of the cash register. Our community, our culture, became commerce. We were becoming isolated from our own spirituality while chasing the so-called "American Dream." If it were not for the efforts of nascent Bata'a such as Kool DJ Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Read 163, and others, our order would have been lost.

Yes, Hip Hop saved the Bata'a. Without it, we would not have survived the Avatar Storm. The word, the drum, the art, and the movement kept us connected to the Ancestors. Without it, our connection to *les Mystères* would have been completely severed.

Now: Let's Be for Real

Right now, the connection is challenged. We have seen too many false MCs grab the mic. We hear too many so-called "producers" recycle the same beat over and over. The art is big business and too many false prophets dishonor the craft. There is nothing wrong with moving forward, but the culture must be preserved, honored, and reclaimed. *Les Mystères* have seen the world that would exist without Hip Hop, and it ain't good.

Track 05. Everybody Wants to Rule the World (Book Of The Oppressor)

Well, there were things we were angry about. We realised we'd become a business, and that was certainly a complaint that we had.

– Curt Smith, *Tears for Fears*

Then: Strange Fruit

Chicago, 1919. Tulsa, 1921. Rosewood,1923. Detroit, 1968. Charlottesville, 2018.

These are only a few instances of the Oppressor's attempts to eliminate us.

They used to call them race riots to distance their crimes, as if the newly freed coveted what they wanted. No, let's keep it real. They were jealous of our autonomy. The fact that we thrived in the absence of their presence, flourished without their influence, threatened the fundamental lie needed to support their brutal caste system. The massacres were part of a pogrom to remind us of our place and keep us in line.

You're just beginning to hear the truth about them now. And the further down the rabbit hole you go, you'll find more enemies lurking in the darkness.

Oppression. You know what that word means. Hell, all Black and Brown people in the Western Hemisphere have an intimate relationship with that word. In many ways, that word defines our existence in this so-called "New World" they call the Americas.

They conquered this "New World" with the gun and gifts filled with disease. They stole the wealth from this land and forced the Ally to strip their land of precious resources for profit. When the Ally proved to not be the workhorse they desired, they sought labor elsewhere...

I mean, They took us from our homes. They stripped us of our clothes, our language, our dignity, our very selves. They loaded us like so much cargo on ships. Naked, sick, frightened, and angry, we arrived in a new land. We were sold like livestock to cruel men as labor for their fields, or to slake their carnal and base desires. We did not know the person with whom we shared the sting of the lash. We were not of the same tribe yet suffered equally in bondage.

In time, we learned who languished next to us in the field. We were forced to learn the slavers' strange and guttural tongues: English, Spanish, French, Portuguese. They forced their ways of being on us in an attempt to break our spirit and make us forget our names. But, in their attempts to homogenize and shape us in their image, they gave us the tools of salvation. We began to share our stories, our rituals, our gods...

We began to share our **power**.

That shared power broke chains. That power wrought resistance, freed slaves, and inspires people to rise up to this day. That is the essence of Bata'a magick. We are the power the Oppressor fears and covets. We are the kind of power the Oppressor must grind underneath its boot. They hate us because they ain't us, ya dig?

Now: Wake Up!

It's always a surprise when the third eye truly opens and you see how the sausage is made and who is wielding the cleaver. The Technocratic Union. Iteration X. The New World Order. These are the agents of the Oppressor who wage spiritual war upon us. The Fauxteps did get one thing right: That conspiracy shit is real. But they ain't ready to deal with how real it is. Facts.

Now: On Sight Beef

This must be said with my whole chest:

Fuck. The. Templar. Knights!

Those self-righteous, pious-ass bastards are the absolute worst! They act like they are doing "God's will" while they are nothing more than the foot soldiers of the Oppressor. Traitor-ass, sellout, goofy-ass, bitches! They are more than happy to be the Oppressor's lapdog, offering too many of us as sacrificial lambs to be slaughtered on the Oppressor's altar. I don't care if they're part of this "Disparate Alliance;" it's "on sight" when it comes to those muddahfuggahs... Real talk!

Now: Just to Get By

This is the struggle. We live in a perpetual state of siege. We not only have to protect ourselves from the everyday ravages of inequality, disenfranchisement, and systemic racism, but we have to keep our heads on a perpetual swivel lest these empty-ass mystical deviants with fancy names and a slick marketing campaign drive us to extinction. We're still reeling from the Technocratic Purge and the Avatar Storm. We're not losing any more of our family. Revolution time is here.

The Bata'a will not only survive these threats... We will thrive in this New World.

Track 06. Yah Mo Be There (Book of the Ally)

This was based on the original Hebrew name for God (Yahweh) and was originally called 'Yahweh Be There.' The title was James Ingram's idea: 'We were talking about how to say 'G-d will be there' without scaring most of the audience away.

– Michael McDonald

No one is an island. We are all connected in this world and the next.

The native people of this New World were also under siege. The Oppressor took what was theirs, claiming it for his own. Those of us who escaped the Oppressor's whip found solace with the Tribes of the New World.

The called themselves the **Carib**, the **Arawak**, the **Taino**, and others. The Seven Clans and the Tribes of the American World would find a kinship and a common enemy in their Oppressors. They would share traditions, spirits, and gods with the Tribes who would, in turn, share their ways and mysteries.

We would not have survived the New World without their aid. They would not have endured their suffering without ours. This is the lesson of the Ally. Bata'a magick is the synthesis of culture and craft. Every aspect of that diversity must be respected.

We commune with the **Orishas** and the **Loa** of our ancestors. We also consult with the **Saints** of Christianity, the **Gods** of other pantheons, **Prophets** of legend, **Great Spirits**, and the near unknowable **Simbi**. This is called "The Seeking." We will take guidance where we can find it.

Keep Your Friends Close

Bata'a magick is one of necessity. It is a survivor's magick, fluid and adaptable. It isn't fancy and it doesn't discriminate. Everything is a respectful negotiation, an exchange of powers and offerings. Now, there are some orders that we roll deeper with than others. The Bata'a may strike an alliance with the Verbena, drop acid with a Child of Knowledge, or rock out with the Taftâni. However, it's with the orphans and Ngoma that we share the closest kinship.

But don't mistake cooperation with capitulation. We Bata'a are our own people. We're in tune with the rhythm of creation. The Drums are our heartbeat—strong, steady, and independent. The Ring Shout is our choir of voices in perfect harmony. Even our relationship with *les Mystères* (the name we use to describe all denizens of the spirit world) is one of mutual respect, not supplication.

So, remember that you'll never be lonely or lost in the night. The Ally is around you; just reach out and call their name.

The Orphans: Down Like John Brown

We consider the orphans to be our brothers from other mothers, our sisters from other misters. They are the self-awakened, the outcasts, the maligned, and the abandoned. We Bata'a can relate to their plight, and they have been some of our staunchest allies in the New World.

Don't get me wrong, they are some wild boys and girls. They switch from practice to practice like someone trying to pick out the best drip to stunt with. There are also some who you really don't want to fuck with, especially the ones that follow them Koresh-type mugs. But a real orphan is a genuine cat who will go to the mat for you. Those are the ones that are down like the Good Lord Bird. That kind of ally is invaluable.

The Ngoma: Brotherman from the Motherland

The Ngoma, basically, are the Bata'a pure and uncut. They're free from the preservatives and byproducts of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Our crafts share the same gods and walk similar paths. To be clear, some of them can be some siddity-ass bastards. You'll find that attitude with the ones that come from the "Grand Families." But the increasing majority of Ngoma are challenging the old hierarchy. They see the writing on the wall and are adapting their methodology as well.

The Bata'a and Ngoma are the Ibeji magick, the Twin Crafts. Together, our combined orders could be nearly unbeatable.

07. Eltshug Ibal Lasiti (The Book of Liberation)

It's all a big hustle...

– The Daktaris

Awww, yeah... You feel that? Dig the crunchiness of the recording with its pops and crackles. The drive of the beat is infectious. It makes you wanna walk... Nope. That's not the right word. It makes you want to strut down the street with the sauce of purpose. Or it makes you want to breakdown a couple of cardboard boxes, throw them on the floor, and do a couple of windmills. Then, here come the horns. Yo, this is a straight-up Black superhero theme song. It's makes you feel triumphant, that you overcame all of your struggles. It feels like Liberation. You finally feel free.

But what is freedom? What does it look like? We are so used to the struggle; do we know what true Liberation is?

Now: Get Money

Dig it: some see having a fat bank account as freedom. Others feel that not experiencing reprisals for their actions, means freedom. There are others that feel that one is not free unless they control the fate of another. That's not freedom. That sure as hell ain't liberation.

In fact, the victories we did achieve were met with harsh repercussions. After the end of chattel slavery, were we free? Was freedom achieved when Black folk finally got the right to vote? Did we reach the Promised Land when a Black man became President of the United States?

No. No. Hell no.

Now: Freedom or Death

We are still in a state of siege. As stated earlier, the Oppressor stays on our necks. The Oppressor uses what they deem as freedoms to keep not only the Bata'a, but the entire world, distracted and sedated. In order to be truly Liberated, one must walk the path of Liberation.

The first step of Liberation is **knowledge**. You must know yourself before they grab the blade of resistance. You must free yourself from the gaze of the Oppressor to completely abandon the false rhetoric, in order for the understanding of what Liberation is to begin.

The next step is **acceptance**. You must accept the absolute truth of yourself and live that truth unabashedly. When you accept yourself, the Yawa Cross will make your path clear. Differences will cease to matter as you realize that all of creation is connected in an intricate tapestry.

The final step to Liberation is **service**. To be Bata'a is to be of service: to your Creyente, to your Clan, to *les Mystères*, to the Ancestors, and to the world. We are the Unknown Revolutionaries. The Bata'a exists to break the invisible shackles of the Oppressor...

No one is free until we are all free.

Welp, looking at my Gucci it's about that time. We're coming to the end of this episode of the Ring Shout. We hope this musical journey set you upon the Path. Remember to know the Self, take care of the Body, rest your Soul, embrace your Clan, value your Allies, and keep your head on a permanent swivel because the Oppressor is everywhere.

Asé!

Character and Traits

Here we look at playing a Bata'a. Before taking a look at sample concepts, instruments, merits, and rotes—start first by answering the question: which of the seven clans are you?

The Seven Clans Made One

The Kongo. The Igbo. The Akan. The Mande. The Fon. The Ewe. The Yoruba.

These were the people taken from Africa. They are the root of almost every child of the Motherland existing in the Diaspora of the Americas and the Caribbean. They are the Ancestors that speak to us, each one following a different path, a different discipline, towards one destination: the liberation of our people from bondage. They are the Seven Clans Made One. The extreme majority of Bata'a are the children of Africa, though there are a growing number of First Nation and Latinx practitioners.

The Ancestors do not call just anyone. This is out of necessity. Honestly, the child of Europe will almost never hear the Drums. It is not their fault. The Oppressor made sure that their connection to the universal all would be tenuous at best. They are too rooted in the Pathology, the ultimate insecurity complex called Supremacy.

Sorry. We didn't make the rules. You got a problem, take it up with *les Mystères*. But watch out. They ain't got time for that Karen/Chad shit.

Kongo

Sphere: Prime

Motto: "Keep your head to the sky"

Instrument: Astrology

The Kongo are Astrologers. They search for the meaning in the sky to divine, and affect, the destiny of humankind. They are the prophets and the Mirror of the Soul. A Kongo will know your darkest self and gather your entire life together... whether you want them to or not. The Kongo are the detectives of the Bata'a. They know all the ways to make you talk.

Igbo

Sphere: Entropy

Motto: "Attackin' the bureaucracy is mandatory for a democracy"

Instrument: Augury

The Igbo are the interpreters of omens. An Igbo uses the gift of Augury to "game the system," manipulating situations and changing outcomes. An Igbo will make somebody zig when they should have zagged. They're the tricksters and the con men of the Bata'a. The Igbo often enter politics as "long shot" candidates, winning elections by using the corrupt nature of their opponents against them. They believe that only through mischief will the truth be revealed.

Akan

Sphere: Forces

Motto: "Put up, or shut up, it's time to double up! Let's roll some dice, bitches!"

Instrument: Cleromancy

The Akan roll the dice and read the cowrie shells, though they may nudge either to fall as the Akan desires.

The Akan are the gamblers and hustlers of the Bata'a. You will usually find an Akan amongst the criminals, gangsters, and other denizens of society's underbelly.

Akan are cocky and reckless — freely taking risks because, ultimately, they know where they're going.

Mande

Sphere: Life

Motto: "God made dirt, and dirt don't hurt!"

Instrument: Rootwork

Mande Bata'a rule the art of Rootwork. They are the healers of the Seven Clans Made One. They hide in plain sight running the botanicas and supplying Bata's with the necessary roots and herbs to work their magick. The Mande are the natural physicians of the Bata'a. They are also the subtle assassins of the Bata'a, being masters of poison craft and the manipulation of their enemies through effigies called Nkisi.

Mande tends to be a feminine art, but anyone can practice if you understand the complexities of the Root. This physical craft is extremely effective in eliminating obstacles the Bata'a may face.

Fon

Sphere: Correspondence

Motto: "Talk about beautiful things a little bit"

Instrument: Transmission

Fon are the communicators of the Bata'a. They are the Messengers. The Fon maintain the Chain of Souls and are the intermediaries between *les Mystères* and the Clan of the Diaspora. Fon Bata'a possess konesans, the "Gift of Eyes." The Fon are Black Twitter. The creation of "memework" is an example of how Fon magick keeps in step with the times. They are the only members of the Bata'a who know of every member, every Creyente, currently operating in the world.

Ewe

Sphere: Mind

Motto: "Losing my brain, going insane, trying to maintain..."

Instrument: Clairvoyance

The Ewe are the Books of Moses, keepers of Bata'a antiquity. They are the repository of all Bata'a knowledge. Ewe magick is no joke. The craft is demanding. The flood of information, the voices of the Ancestors, that's a lot for a mug to handle. Though extremely talented in the arts (visual, literary, musical, etc.), you'll find many Ewe becoming overwhelmed. Many of them suffer psychotic breaks from the experience. However, if one can handle the overflow of information, an Ewe has access to troves of hidden and lost knowledge.

Yoruba

Sphere: Spirit

Motto: "Let's make something happen."

Instrument: Possession

The Yoruba is a warrior's path. They are the Chwal, horses of *les Mystères*. The Loa and Orisha, the mightiest of *les Mystères*, work through the Bata'a who practices this craft. Unyielding, determined, and just flat out hardcore, the Yoruba are the revolutionaries, the heroes of the Bata'a. They are also the clan who wield the Sèvitè. You must have a strong mind and a heart filled with purpose to be a Yoruba, lest you lose yourself to *les Mystères*.

Concepts

Here are three character concepts to kick off your Bata'a experience.

The Grand Dame: Mande Traditionalist

Marianne Baptiste, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll, Issa Rae — all ageless Bata'a women. You are one of their kin and, no, you don't put up with peope asking about your age or beauty routine.

You hail from the Baptiste Creyente, one of the most respected houses in the Bata'a order. Your house has existed for over a hundred years, leading the Creyente through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement. You were there for all of it — and now you're active in this season of Black Lives Matter.

Note: The Grand Dame is an experienced Bata'a. Talk to your Storyteller before choosing this concept, and ask about extra starting xp. Alternatively, maybe a Nephandi or Technocrat bound your power.

The Choir of One Voice: Ewe Caregiver

Your father was one of the most gifted and celebrated soul musicians of the 1970s. His songs painted portraits of inner city life that audiences could not ignore. He was of the Ewe Clan and could not handle the weight of the spiritual overload, ultimately taking his own life.

You were seven years old, then, and Awakened when you found out your father died. It was hard, being so young, but your father guided you as your Ancestor. Being on the other side gave him a peace he never knew while alive, and he used that to help you guard the Books of Moses.

Now a Grammy-award winning recording artist in your own right, you use your gift to maintain the bond between *les Mystères* and the Bata'a. Don't mistake your soft demeanor for weakness. *Les Mystères* speak through you — and the Choir of One Voice is a devastating weapon when wielded by a diva.

The Fist of Thunder: Yoruba Judge

You were raised on these rough South Side Chicago streets as a resident of the "Wild Hundreds." Already a frequent target of police harassment, you were arrested for assaulting an off-duty officer attempting to force a neighborhood girl into performing a sex act. You were sentenced to 15 years in a maximum security prison.

You Awakened during a prison riot. Possessed by Shango, the Orisha of lightning and justice, you escaped from your cell during the melee. Being possessed by such a powerful member of *les Mystères* garners a lot of attention. Fortunately, a Yoruba Creyente found you and fashioned a crude Sèvitè to house the mighty orisha.

Shango chose you as his Chwal because of your sense of honor and rough, street-hewn methods of dispensing justice. As "Queen of the Hood" you use your craft to defend those who cannot defend themselves.

Monter a Chwal (Riding the Horse)

Becoming the physical vessel of *les Mystères* is the greatest magick in the Bata'a order.

It is also the most dangerous.

Les Mystères can possess anyone of any age or gender. If the spell is done improperly, the Loa could wreak havoc in the physical world. Remember, not all of the Ancestors are kind. Some have been made very bitter by their time on this plane. Some of them are outright wicked and mean to do great harm.

To be a Chwal, or "Horse" for *les Mystères* takes a strong will, lest one loses themselves to the spirit world and become its slave. It is a strenuous craft, usually reserved for the Yoruba. However, other clans like the Ewe and the Kongo, have been known to practice this aspect of the craft as well in times of emergency.

This spell must be done during a Ring Shout as it takes a gathering of the Seven Made One to keep the wild spirits at bay. The drums and songs must be specific to the initiate and *les Mystères* they will become the Chwal for. In the heat of the bodies moving in wild dance and the throb of the drums, the initiate falls into a trance. During this time, *les Mystères* enter the body of the Chwal and displace one half of the initiate's gwo bon anj, also called the soul. *Les Mystères* share their power with the Chwal, while the Chwal takes on the behavior of their spirit mate. Once *les Mystères* "rides the horse," the Chwal regains themselves, but now are eternally bonded with their spirit mate. This bond is unbreakable. The congregation greets *les Mystères* and the Chwal with dance and song, and presents them with the Sèvitè.

Instrument: Sèvitè

Background Cost 7 pts., Prerequisite: Arete 5

As the Chwal and *les Mystères* bond, seven elders of the Ring Shout (preferably one from each Clan) take the root from the oldest tree and create the Sèvitè: a conjure staff signifying the bond between *les Mystères* and the Chwal. The union of *les Mystères* and the Chwal is carved in the language of runes and other symbols of the Chwal's clan. The Sèvitè is stained with a mixture of the Chwal's goofer dust, the preferred liquid offering, or "drank" of *les Mystères*, and the blood of the Chwal. This cane must be completed within three days. Otherwise, the Chwal will perish, as the human body was not meant to house that much spiritual power for an extended length of time.

The Sèvitè is a sign of the high office and, possibly, the mightiest weapon a Bata'a can possess. The Sèvitè increases the Chwal's roll in their affinity Sphere by +3 dice. As a physical weapon, it grants the Chwal a +4 dice bonus on attack rolls.

Instrument: Mojo Bag

Background Cost 1 pts., Prerequisite: Arete 1

A Mojo Bag carries more than dust, dirt, and wine. Back in the day, the Elders would fill their Tobes (the ancient name of the Mojo Bag) with earth, grave, and palm wine. Depending upon your clan and *les Mystères*, your Mojo Bag will hold the amulets, tokens, coins, and other ingredients granted by your ancestors and required for your craft. It should contain your offering to Ellegua when you need to travel the Crossroads. Your local botanica should have most of what you need.

The Mojo Bag is all about intention. Just don't forget the goofer dust, and make sure it's made with real snakeskin. That's the secret sauce to making any Bata'a magick pop off. If it doesn't have the spirit of Damballah in the mix, your Mojo Bag will be useless when working the craft.

Creating the Mojo Bag is an art all its own. It's an intimate and personal act, as you bring a new life into the world. Incense must be burned, and candles must be lit, bringing the breath of life into the bag. You must commune with your clan and your Ancestors to ask for their blessings in this endeavor. Finally, the Bag must be fed depending on the demands of the clan. One may ask for liquor; another clan may ask for perfume. Another could be satisfied with water while another may demand blood... Or worse. Still, if you want to make sure that the Bag is alive with spirit, then you must feed the Bag.

Having a well-crafted Mojo Bag grants a +1 die bonus on rolls in your Clan's affinity Sphere.

Loco's Palm
(• • • • Life 4)

Named for the first houngan and the patron of healers, Loco's Palm can only be performed by a member of the Mande Clan. It's a down and dirty spell, used only in emergencies to heal the physical wounds of another person, never the Mande themselves.

The Mande first makes a deep cut on the palm of their hand and pours the preferred "drank" of *les Mystères* onto the wound. Next, the Mande rubs a portion of their mojo bag's goofer dust onto the cut. They place their wounded hand onto the injured's wound and sing to *les Mystères*, sharing their life energy with the wounded.

System: You heal 2 damage of any severity by sacrificing a point of Stamina — healing and sacrificing as many points as you pay for. You regain lost Stamina through a good night's rest.

Children of Knowledge

Nothing happens until the pain of remaining the same outweighs the pain of change.

— Arthur Burt

The Cat in the Club

Cheshire glows bright across the dance floor, their Cat in the Hat striped stovepipe bobbing and bopping in ultraviolent glee. Big wooly yeti boots blaze pink and blue, their colors weaving as Cheshire stomps a happy beat. Criss-cross leggings shimmer to the pounding pulse, topped by a neon tutu and a bright tuxedo jacket that hides a slender body of uncertain gender. True to their name, Cheshire's grin flashes as they dance your way, two glowing glasses held in outstretched hands. "Fuck pills," Cheshire shouts above the music. "Have a drink!" The glasses boil with luminescent shine – one red, the other blue.

Around you both, the rave counts off its sixth hour. Dancing bodies seethe with sweat. Colors nature never pictured whirl and pump their psychotropic spell. Behind pink eyeglass frames, Cheshire's pupils gleam lambent, like a cat's. "C'mon," Cheshire insists, holding out the bubbling drinks. "They won't hurt you – I swear." Tonight, all things wise and sinister seem possible.

What the hell, right? Who wants to live forever?

You grasp the red drink, naturally. Its smooth surface bears a design. Etched into the thick glass, a crowned and rampant lion capers by your palm, a cup held in the lion's own paw. The blue glass hosts an etched unicorn, likewise dancing on two legs, an amphora clutched between her raised front hooves. Around Cheshire's neck, dangling beneath a bright red bow tie, a chain bears two serpents intertwined across a winged staff: the caduceus, symbol of Hermes, which wakes sleeping minds and sends awakened minds to sleep.

Against your expectations, the boiling drink tastes cool. Fizzy and soothing, with bites of cinnamon. It burns cold on the way down. "Better?" Cheshire asks. Nodding affirmation, you spot blue-glowing body paint swirled across the backs of Cheshire's hands. One hand reads THING 1. The other, now freed of the glass you took, reads THING 2.

Cheshire nods toward the tables past the dance floor. Low, glowing, and shaped like mushrooms, they rise slightly above a mess of cushions. Cheshire offers you their free hand and leads you toward the mushroom groves. "Sit down," your guide says, their voice less shouty away from the amps. "You're safe here. We both are." As you accept the offer, Cheshire slips off the pink eyeglasses and regards you eye to eye. A cool and pleasant fizzle rides up from your belly to your head. Cat eyes stare back into your own as Cheshire grins again. "It's okay," they assure you. "Like I said, you're safe while you're with me." They tilt their head with graceful mischief. "And I promise, at least for now, that I won't disappear."

Of Chickens, Eggs, and Rhetorical Omelets

I'll warn you right now: If you've come to me for answers, you're not going to like them. We're not consistently voted Group Most Likely to Get Kicked Off the Team Again because of our talent for saying what people want to hear. No, we say what people *don't* want to hear. Not because we're assholes (though we can be) or because we have some Deep Dark Truth That No One Wants to Acknowledge (though they usually don't), but because we're annoyingly non-literal. The first rule of understanding both alchemy and alchemists is that everything, and I mean *everything*, is symbolic. Literalism is the hobgoblin of tiny minds, and the biggest Gandalfs on the planet have the tiniest minds you can imagine.

People have this idea that alchemy is about turning lead into gold. That notion got a lot of people turned into

firewood back in the bad old days, and it's annoyingly persistent even now. You'd think that a discipline at least as old as Ancient Egypt would get a little more respect, but what can I say? Human beings are greedy bastards, and if you tell the average person that your timeless art of self-perfection makes folks rich, immortal, or both, you're going to capture their attention in the best and worst ways. Best-case scenario, you score some patrons to support your efforts. Worst-case scenario, you wind up on the rack for heresy before going out in a blaze of glory because you didn't make Righteous Joe Clergyman filthy rich. Yes, most of us *can* turn lead into gold. It's a simple task for anyone with even the most rudimentary understanding about the fungible properties of physical matter. For those of us who understand what alchemy really is, though, lead-into-gold is a parlor trick intended to literally buy time to pursue the *true* Great Work: elevating consciousness to nonphysical immortality.

Consciousness, see, is the true reality. The rest of it's just space dust and delusions of grandeur. This isn't a new or even particularly radical idea. You can find it floating around on pictograms and goatskins so old it's a miracle they're still readable at all. Philosophers and scientists toss it around as thought experiments and exercises in mathematical indulgence. Thing is, human beings are *remarkably* stubborn about their preconceptions. Tell a man you can turn lead into gold, and he'll give you whatever you want; tell him that lead and gold are both figments of our imagination, and he'll dismiss you, worship you, kill you, or some inevitable progression of all three, probably not in that order. In our case, it's led to our alchemical order being on ins and outs with pretty much everyone from the Catholic Church to kings of industry and the Merlins-Gone-Wild who still call themselves "Traditions" with a straight face. Right now, certain people find us useful enough to keep around. Like any mortal thing, though, that's a passing condition. I know it, they know it, and the rest of us know it too.

If there's one constant in our little band of reprobates, it's that we wind up pissing people off. When you want lead turned into gold, or just some really great drugs, there's an open door with a gilded neon welcome mat outside. Eventually, though, our inconvenient truths become *too* inconvenient. The welcome mat becomes an ejector seat, and if I've tortured that metaphor enough for one conversation you can look at it this way: The Solificati have the dubious distinction of having belonged to, and been ejected from, both the Traditions and the Technocracy on several occasions. The clock's ticking, I'm sure, on our membership within this "Disparate Alliance," but the other constant in our history is that we land on our feet like a rubber cat thrown from a great height. Fall, impact, bounce-bounce-bounce. That's our story, and we're sticking with it.

Cups and Monkeys and Burning Black Powders

If I wanted to get literal, I could tell you about Egypt and the Cupbearers of Isis. I could go on about the Monkey King Sunwukong, "Awakened to Emptiness," also known as Shíhóu ("Stone Monkey") and many other names, who embodies Taoist alchemical principles in the way he transforms through constant destruction and renewal. I could discuss the Phoenix in various cultures and incarnations, dying and regenerating its way from Egypt to China to India, Persia, and Greece. I'd bring up Athens and Baghdad and the ways in which the word *alchemy* combines the Arabic article *al*, "the," with the Greek *chymeia*, "chemistry/ transformation" — or possibly the Egyptian *khemeia*, "preparation of the black powder." I'd mention how Muslim scholars rescued alchemical arts from the ruins of the Greek and Roman cultures, combining them with Jewish mysticism to form medieval alchemy as we understand it now. I could go on about medieval Prague, "the City of Alchemists," Hermes Trismegistus, Paracelsus, Jabir ibn Ḥayyan and his "gibberish," Maria the Jewess and her theories of gender polarity principles, and the messy relationships between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim authorities and practitioners which gave us the Western magical traditions as the masses understand them. I'd toss in the alchemical disciplines cultivated in Al-Andalus, inspiring the accomplishments of Saville, Cordova, and the fires of the Inquisition. All of that, of course, culminated in the formation of the first of many iterations of "the Crowned Ones," whose name also evokes *Sol*, the Sun, and the associated illumination and majesty our order wears with sarcastic pride even now.

(If you really want to sound pretentious, you could pronounce it "Crown-*ed* Ones," too. Some folks like the archaic feel that brings to the name. Me, I like keeping things plain. It's your call. Either name works.)

I'm sure you already know the legends about how the language of alchemy is obtuse and symbolic in order to keep its practitioners from being burnt alive by fearful commoners, jealous rivals, and bitter clients. Here's the truth, though: It would all be rendered as abstract symbols even if those alchemists hadn't lived in constant fear for their lives, because *alchemy isn't literal*. It's *symbolic*. All of it. In order to understand the true principles of alchemy,

and the true nature of those who pursue it, you have to stop thinking literally. It's metaphorical chickens and rhetorical eggs, and the omelet in question is Reality itself. Historical facts are academic illusions grafted over ineffable truths.

Of White Lions and Royal Roads

Along that winding path of legends, our people adopted the phrase "the Royal Road." Distinguishing rank puffers from true alchemists, that Road maps the journey from childish indulgence and egotistical ignorance to the greater heights and depths of understanding. Self-perfection, not material wealth, is the goal of travel on the Road. Like Mansa Musa, the King of Mali whose riches originated from his alchemical devotions, the traveler along that Royal Road seeks Mecca, Nirvana, or whatever else you want to call it — not the growth of one's bank account, but the expansion of one's immortal essence. Sure, it helps to throw around some gold along the way. The *gold is not the point*, though. It never was. Nor is immortality, although our people have a long history with the healing arts too. It's no accident that so much alchemy wound up gifting the world with modern chemistry... and, by extension, medicine. Sure, there are plenty of selfish alchemists. Most of us, though, are generous to a fault. Self-perfection, after all, is rarely a game for selfish assholes.

That said, our altruism gets us in trouble, too.

Being philosopher-scientists, we were drawn into the Convention of the White Tower as part of a "Golden Guild" alliance that united our progenitors with those proto-Progenitors who called themselves *Cosians* back when curing leprosy seemed more worthwhile than grafting tentacles to puppy dogs. The High Guild, of course, was glad to have us, and its descendant Syndicate is still happy to make us offers we really should refuse. We don't play well with others, though, especially not when those others have a knightly sword stuck up their ass. In what became part of a familiar pattern, the Crown got smashed to the floor and broken up into pieces that were ground down, smelted, and reforged to signify a new Solificati order, this time alongside King Gandalf, Witchie-Poo, and assorted lunatics who called themselves the Council of Nine Mystic Traditions.

Yeah, *that* went well.

According to the "official" story, everything went swimmingly until the Solificati fucked everything up. That's the Council's story. Here's ours:

Of Heylel, the Two-Made-One

Let's address the alchemist in the middle of the room: The so-called Abomination, the Great Betrayer, all the lovely names they've tied around the person who dared to call the august Council on its shit. Let's talk Heylel Teomim, the Crown'ed One who supposedly delivered the Council's First their first and final defeat.

To clarify something that's become somewhat of a sore spot in recent years, Heylel was not "trans" in the sense of the word today. They weren't one being manifesting as a gender different than the one people felt they should be assigned at birth. No, Heylel was literally two people, two consciousnesses, fused into a single physical form, a *rebis*, that melded the bodies of both polarities into one. From an alchemical standpoint, this was a symbolic act made flesh — a walking metaphor, if you want to get poetic about it. And if you're also seeing that through a Christian lens, maybe even a Hindu lens, and imagining that fusion as a metaphor for the god-made-flesh, then you're not far wrong. As I've said, the physical body is a shell, no more "real" or "solid" than a chunk of rock. The merging of a Red King and White Queen into a single lump of flesh united by joined consciousness is not a *person* — they're a *symbol*. The concept of a symbol who's also a person should be obvious to anyone who's ever claimed to have a personal relationship with the Anointed One. *Tell* them that, though, and they're looking for a nice warm stake to tie you to while you burn. After trying and failing a few times to drive that notion through the heads of Gandalfs and Singing Nuns, we gave up trying. But no, Heylel was not a human being born queer. Heylel was an idea personified. Understand that, and you begin to understand what they did and why they were right to do it.

Putrefaction is an essential step in alchemy. Without rot and destruction, the substance can't move forward to another state of being. You know how you make lead? You dig up dirt, grind it down, drown the powder, sift out the good stuff, heat it, blast it, and refine and separate its elements through constant heat and pressure. That's just *lead*. Refining that substance into gold demands arcane tortures cultivated through millennia of experiments and failure. That's what Heylel did to the Council of Nine: took its ideals to the furnace and the grinding mill.

And the Council failed.

You would think that a collection of big brains would understand what had been done. Might understand the nature of sacrifice. Might even have understood that by breaking a *fricking alchemist* down to their composite elements and scattering those elements, the Council was

fulfilling Heylel's plan all along. You'd think some Singing Nun might have twigged to the parallels between Christ's sacrifice, Heylel's sacrifice, and the symbolic alchemical elements of both. Nope, nope, nope. Instead, you have 500 years of pearl-clutching self-deception that still misses Heylel's point entirely. The Traditions have been rotting for over half a millennium, yet they're still no closer to the truth than they were when they turned Heylel to dust.

No wonder they've never won their "war."

The Council didn't just scatter Heylel. They scattered the Solificati, too. The Royal Road split off in various directions. Some led back to the Order of Reason, or to solitude, or to lodges hidden all over Europe and Africa and eventually — thanks to Paschal Beverley Randolph — the Americas. Most of us aren't big on hierarchy, but a few alchemists who love structure went and snuggled up to Gandalf the Git. "House Solificati," my neon kitty ass! A handful even followed that faux-Heylel loaf-pinch back in the 90s and got their nuts lightninged off in the Concordia War. Those of us who actually pay attention to the symbols know that Heylel transcended this delusionary mud pit. The Council's punishment was an act of alchemy... an act they're still too rigid to understand, much less follow, many centuries later. You'd think a few falling Towers, so to speak, would have taught them what Heylel was trying to say. Frankly, though, I doubt it.

But *we* do.

The best of us do, anyway.

How Now, Red Cow?

We live in a world built by alchemy now. Half the substances that surround us aren't found in nature — they're made by human arts. This little plastic castle we inhabit is pretty frikkin' far from an alchemical ideal, though. Which is why so many of us stopped trying to recreate matter and switched to rearranging minds.

Like I said earlier, consciousness is the only true Reality. This eggshell world we live in is meant to be cracked open so we can fly. Until we do, we're all just this half-formed yolky mess. Phoenix ashes. Stone monkeys. Choose whatever metaphor you want, it boils down to the same thing: We're stuck in our preconceptions until we crack the shell and share a toast with the Red Lion and the White Unicorn, the King and Queen, the Sun and Moon, Red Bull and White Cow. Until we shatter hard enough to merge into sublime union, transformed into substance greater than our selves.

The first psychotropic revolution of modern times went sour because it *had* to. Centuries of industrial empire thinking needed fermentation in the minds and veins of its children. It's not a pleasant truth, but truth isn't Disneyland. Pain is part of the deal you sign on for when you live. *Suffering*, though, is optional. Me, I choose not to suffer even when life hurts. My body's just the egg where consciousness gestates and waits to break free.

Since the 60s, we alchemists have used popular culture as an incubator for greater consciousness. Smart drugs, energy drinks, trance music, surrealist art — they're the acid bath and the blast furnace and the grinding mill for the industrial self. When the White Queen's sister Heroin made the rounds, dancing with their hyper sibling Cocaine, our people offered something better: a holistic egg where physical and metaphysical phenomena collide. We're not the only ones with that idea, of course, and it's all fun and games until someone loses their mind. That's part of the process, though. The dirt winds up on the bottom of the bath. Pure elements rise to the top and get transformed.

Fractured Futures

One of the eggs broken in our reality omelet is the delusion of space-time continuity. To the average person, we exist within a single, homogenous timeline. The smart ones know that's not true.

In one timeline, our Technocratic colleagues took terminal offense to having too many cooks in the kitchen. A few massacres later, everyone was running for what was left of their lives. A bunch of alchemists decided to play Let's Get the Band Back Together with the Hermetic Order, and they scored an also-ran House to keep them loyal. The rest of us didn't like that, and so we've been fighting like ex-bandmates over the name because we didn't want to sound like Harry Potter wannabes.

One timeline features pretty much everyone getting nuked by a spiritual crisis that killed off the old Gandalfs and left new kids in charge. We didn't take much of a hit from that situation, as running around in pocket dimensions was never a big thing for alchemists. There wound up being lots of room to move in that timeline, though, so the Solificati scooped up survivors and laid a lot of new eggs that began to hatch not long afterward. In that timeline, as I understand it, Solificati have become one of the dominant sects on earth, thanks partly to club culture and the international trance-festival scene. Most rivals can't see us there, and we like it that way!

There's one ugly timeline where we got mowed down by Terminator Junior *and* nuked by Gandalf-killer spirit-storm. That's pretty bad, and lots of eggs got broken before the new generation kicked in. A bunch of stuff was lost;

the internet found it, and so when the Solificati came back, we came back strong.

There are timelines where Terminator Junior has devils in his head, another where Gandalf is Sauron in disguise, and one or two where *both* are true and the world's literally heading into hell. In those worlds, we're all pretty much buggered with the Eiffel Tower, but we alchemists are making sure the last party stays weird enough to maybe lead to someplace better when this world cracks open and its shells fall into the Tree of Life's long shadow.

Which timeline are we part of now?

I have no idea, to be honest. Won't it be fun, though, to find out?

Funny Hats and Herding Cats

It's good to have friends. Our weird little world provides seed capital for this week's Alliance, and while I doubt any of us see this as a lasting partnership, it provides us all with what we need right now. Hollowers get cool parties and good drugs. Everybody else gets lead-forged gold and a safe space to hide and meet where Terminator Junior is less likely to show his face. I can't say we're everybody's favorite cousin, but hey — it's all temporary, so why sweat the details? Change is the only constant on the road to perfection. Whatever happens, we're gonna be okay.

Traditionally Ecstatic

We are not, you might say, on good terms with the Council of Nine. If they aren't still holding a six-century grudge over Heylel's party trick, they're expecting us to stand in line like good little Hermies who've learned their lesson without realizing that *Hermes is a frikkin' trickster god.* The only Tradition in that group that hasn't got us chiseled across the top of their naughty list is the home Tradition of Akrites Solonicus: The Seer who saw through the Great Pretender's identity theft back when the 90s kicked everything to shit. We've got lots in common with the Cult, including a malcontent rep, a talent for principled disorder, and an appreciation for the finer chemicals in life. I won't say we're besties, because we're not. Unlike the Gandalfs, though, the Singing Nuns, and especially the Witchie-Poos (who never forgave Heylel for breaking Eloine's heart back in the human-kindling era), the time tricksters seem to appreciate a good joke at everyone else's expense.

The Joke's on Gandalf, and I'm not Laughing

The joke in question is... excuse me if I can't say it with a straight face... "House Solificati." Um, *no*. These grumblebeards are every stereotype about alchemists you've ever heard: over-serious, taciturn, utterly lacking in imagination, and so stuck in their own egos that their shells will never break and their wings will never spread. They think we're a bunch of drug-addled club kids, we think they're a bunch of wank-offs, and the chance of us getting back together makes David Gilmore and Roger Waters look like best buds. Not. Gonna. Happen. Ever.

Steampunk Scientists

To be fair, we do have friends among the Etherites. Really, though — do they even *qualify* as a "tradition"? They sort of took our place as the Victorian age wound down, but that's mostly because the Order of Reason turned genocidal treachery into an art form, and some scientists were not along for that ride. They're no more "mages" than their hacker colleagues are, and they stole some of their best moves, metaphysically speaking, from us to begin with. You could call us kindred spirits; I wouldn't call us friends. If things shake loose in that tottering castle of theirs, though, our Alliance will be the first place the mad scientists come calling. We'll open up the door for them, and we'll laugh as we slam it in everybody else's face.

The Eternal Grinding Wheel

Despite long ties to the Order of Reason, the modern Technocracy is alchemy's anathema. Sure, they grind and blast and melt things down. In *their* perfect world, though, the egg never hatches. The Lion can't dance. The King and Queen remain chaste forever. There is no growth and no escape from their Utopia. Just grinding wheels, fool's gold, and a heart of lead where wonder used to live.

Broken Shells of Bitter Worlds

That shadow beneath the Tree of Life? That's Creation's toxic runoff pool. It's poisonous silt. Radioactive shit. It's the worst of the worst of the worst, a Phoenix that hatches from atomic bombs. Sometimes that toxic runoff walks on two legs and calls itself "enlightened." I'll give Nephandi credit for one thing: No one understands the darkness of Creation like they do. There's something to be learned there if you're reckless enough to step near that shadow. Don't be surprised, though, when it bites you hard. In alchemy, putrefaction is a step toward something greater. With Nephandi, it's the end of the Royal Road — a rot which never ends.

Speaking of endings, I've got to run off now.

Have fun dancing with the Lion. And tell the White Queen I said hello.

Creation's egg is cracking.

I wonder what we'll find outside.

Character and Traits

Behind each history are human beings, the things they do, and the tools they employ.

Solificati Concepts

Contrary to the popular image of an alchemist, Crown'd Ones from the Disparate Alliance tend to be vibrant, young, and generally intense. That apparent youth, of course, can be deceptive; delayed aging is a simple trick for alchemists. That said, studious graybeards gravitate toward the Hermetic House Solificati, not the malcontent Disparates. The following concepts show just a few potential roles these chemical pranksters might occupy today.

Neon Trickster

Life's too important to take seriously. So, you don't. Oh, you're not *frivolous*, though many people think otherwise. You simply understand that mortality is a joke where most folks miss the punchline. You used to feel that way too. You got better. Having bent your perceptions around the obstacles which obscure the truth, you now use your Arts and wits to invert the sullen view of life and show instead how joyful it can be.

Unlike would-be Jokers, you're not malign. You *do* understand humor's roots in cruelty but prefer punching up whenever possible while softening the blow with pretty colors and compassionate words. The rave scene hosts sad souls whose smiles wear thin when the drugs wear off. You like to keep the party going — not with deception but with truth. You've seen the beauty at the heart of this world's pain. Sharing that beauty and soothing that pain is, to you, the finest kind of high.

Occult Surrealist

Words fly. Images linger. Even before you looked Creation in the face, your images said what words could not. Alchemy's symbolic language speaks a deeper truth to you than rambling discourse did, and so now you hardly speak at all. Instead, you explore Creation's enigmas through paint and pixels, striving to express the sublime terrors of this fallen realm while revealing the keys to escaping it.

Before Awakening, you drew from the eerie wells of occult symbology. Now, with open eyes and questing heart, you mix alchemical concoctions and principles into the mundane tools of art. Your paintings shimmer with Quintessential vitality, seeming to move and breathe of their own accord. Folks who see your images find it hard to look away; instead, they look deeper… and see *more*… and perhaps begin to *understand*…

Street-Level Philanthropist

You know what it is to be poor. Decent meals, during your childhood, were rare. To distract yourself, you fled to the local library. Was it chance that drew you to those books about magic, or was it something more? Between the New Age trash and Evangelical tracts, you found the book that changed your life. Now, decades later, you employ alchemical arts to save other folks from poverty.

Changing lead into gold is easier than changing gold into currency. You've spent years puzzling out the legal and economic pitfalls of dumping gold into the market. With a sure and subtle hand, however, you've parlayed alchemical acumen into a small fortune — one you use to improve the lives of those around you. It's apparently an endless task, but that's okay. If you can save a few children from growing up like you did, it'll be worth every cent you can create.

Alchemical Arts

An alchemist, obviously, practices alchemy. The *type* of alchemy that person pursues depends a lot on the tools, magicks, and beliefs involved. Euro-Arabian alchemy focuses on material transmutations as metaphors for spiritual transcendence, while Asian alchemy (Taoist and otherwise) concentrates on energetic transmutation that may or may not have physical effects. In game terms, the former discipline emphasizes the Matter, Life, and Prime Spheres, while the latter emphasizes the Prime, Forces, and Spirit Spheres. Both involve emotional influence (Mind) and an understanding of permanence and decay (in game terms, Entropy). Though the Solificati deal primarily with western alchemical practices, eastern practices have become more common than they once were.

Solificati Focus

From a game standpoint, all Solificati employ the *alchemy* practice. Many augment that practice with one or more of the following: *The Art of Desire*, *craftwork*, *dominion*, *elementalism*, *invigoration*, *medicine-work*, *weird science*, and possibly *hypertech*, *witchcraft*, and /or *yoga*.

Any alchemical practice demands time, tools, and preparation. Legendary alchemists can work beyond such trivia, of course, but that degree of accomplishment takes years (even centuries) of dedication to achieve. From a game-system perspective, this means that a character practicing alchemy focuses her practice through instruments.

Common alchemical instruments include: artwork (heavily and sometimes entirely symbolic texts), books and periodicals, brews and concoctions, cups and vessels, drugs and poisons, elements, energy, food and drink, formulae and math, gems and stones, herbs and plants, labs and gear (essential for any alchemist), languages (Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, Mandarin, Greek, Ancient Egyptian), meditation, money and wealth, symbols (vital to alchemy), and writings. Taoist and Tantric alchemy may also involve eye contact, prayers, sacred inconography, and sex and sensuality. Tech-entraced Solificati may also employ computers, dance, devices and machines, fashion, group rites (raves) music, ordeals (intense events), and possibly nanotech and brain-computer interface.

Rules for Tools

Story-wise, your character has refined those instruments back at the lab; by the time she hits the field, those tools are *standard* and *personalized instruments* (**Mage 20**, pp. 587) used to cast the desired Effects. Standard instruments are common tools, while personalized instruments are tools that a particular mage employs for particular Effects. Johnny Two-Crows, for example, might use specially prepared crushed quartz, silver dust and salt crystals as standard instruments in his alchemical tool kit; when casting a **Base**, **Complex** or **Sublime Transmutation**, however, he employs his special Changing Stone as the personalized instrument for those spells.

Instruments and Wonders

An important distinction: A substance that holds no innate power unless the alchemist uses it is an *instrument*; a substance that has been invested with magick of its own is a *Wonder*. All alchemists use instruments; skillful ones can create Wonders. If your alchemist pulls out vials of elixirs and potions when casting Effects, those are instruments; if the elixir itself is an enchanted potion anyone can use, it's a Wonder.

You can find simple rules for crafting Wonders in **Mage 20** (pp. 651-653), while more extensive ones can be found in **The Book of Secrets** (pp. 139-159).

Alchemical Effects

Legendary powers of alchemy range from simple transmutations of base material to sublime purifications of vital energy. For a wide selection of alchemical workings, see the **How Do You DO That?** entries for the following phenomena: Conjuration, Transformation, Shapechanging, and Modification; Energy-Work; Elemental Mastery; and Uncanny Influence.

Other Solificati specialties include:

Base, Complex, and Sublime Transmutation (●●+ Matter; possibly combined with other Spheres)

Utilizing ancient alchemical secrets, the alchemist shifts the properties of a simple material substance or object into something similar yet valuable in the eyes of men. Changing lead into gold is easy if you know how. Changing it into gold *permanently*, however, is a more labor-intensive process.

System: As detailed in **Mage 20** (pp. 518-519), Matter 2 transforms one simple material into another. Higher

Ranks of Matter, combined with other Spheres, can enact complex and radical transmutations, even (with Prime 2) crafting substances from "thin air."

The more precious and sophisticated the materials, the more successes that task demands. Even so, the process is easy. Dropping large amounts of gold into the marketplace without attracting unwanted attention? Now, *that's* a harder task!

This Effect is vulgar with regards to the usual Consensus, which is why it's traditionally performed in a Sanctum or Chantry.

The White Queen's Kiss
(●● or ●●●● Mind / ●●● or ●●●● Life)

A fine-ground powder — blown into someone's face, mixed into their drink, or otherwise introduced to that target's bloodstream — drops that person into deep slumber. Traditionally used to avoid awkward confrontations, this trick leaves no trace that mundane toxicology reports can spot.

System: The Kiss features several variations:

- Mind 2 sends an impulse to sleep. The recipient can resist that impulse, though, with a successful Willpower roll (difficulty 6).
- Life 3 alters the target's body chemistry, making that character feel sleepy. Again, a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) can resist the Effect.

These basic variations require time (generally two to five turns) to take effect. The targeted character begins to nod off, eventually (if the caster succeeds) slipping into dreamland.

Stronger variants drop the targeted character immediately:

- Mind 4 projects a command to *Sleep Right Now*. Unless the target realizes he's been targeted by some unusual attack (and resists with a successful Willpower roll, again verses difficulty 6), he drops into deep sleep.
- Life 4 essentially transforms an awake character into a sleeping character. No Willpower roll can resist this Effect. The target falls instantly asleep.

In all cases, the spell lasts for the usual Duration. Characters bespelled by the basic variations of the Kiss can be awakened through the normal methods you'd use to wake a sleeping person up. The stronger variations last until the Effect's Duration expires.

The White Queen's Kiss can put any living creature to sleep. Night-Folk have more resistance to such spells, however, (see **Mage 20**, p. 546, and **How Do You DO That?** p. 116-117), with vampires, robots, ghosts, and so forth remaining completely immune.

Given Hollywood reality and "sleep drug" folklore, this Effect is coincidental.

Elixir of Youth
(●●● or ●●●● Life / possibly with ●●● Time)

Slowing the inexorable march of time is a hallmark pursuit in alchemy. This preparation (which might involve potions, infusions, creams, or other chemical applications) literally slows time in the recipient's physical Pattern. The body still functions normally, of course, but temporal degradation crawls to a fraction of its normal speed.

System: Life 3 lets the alchemist slow the rate of her own aging, while Life 4 lets her slow aging for somebody else. The Time 3 variation literally stops the cells from deteriorating, while Life 3 or 4 alone slows aging through cellular regeneration. Five successes or more essentially grants the recipient the Merit: *Unaging*. Damage and sickness, of course, have their normal effects upon the beneficiary of this spell.

Unless you're playing a chronicle measured in years or decades, this Effect becomes a coincidental plot device.

Wake the Red Lion
(●●● or ●●●● Life)

A quick dose of magick boosts vitality and strength. Generally taken as a pill, a quaffed potion, or a swig of energy drink, this concoction helps you get through long nights of study or weekend-long raves.

System: Life 3 (for one's self) or 4 (for someone else) temporarily raises one of the recipient's Attributes. The caster can determine which Attribute gets raised: Strength increases physical might, Dexterity boosts coordination and grace, Stamina provides more energy and resilience, Social Traits enhance the character's interpersonal skills, and Mental Traits sharpen the recipient's neurological capacity.

Each success raises the Trait in question by one dot per success. The Effect lasts for the usual Duration, although especially elaborate and successful workings may raise the Trait in question permanently. For details, see **HDYDT?** (pp. 21-22)

Subtle applications of this spell remain coincidental. Instant bulky muscles, though, are rather vulgar.

ORPHANS

Not All Who Wander Are Lost
— JRR Tolkien, *The Riddle of Strider*

The Laudromat Prophet

The neon letters overhead read Laundromat. If you turn your head and squint, looking through your eye lashes, they read Fortures instead. Zie said you'd come back. After you mocked zir trade – I mean, come on, fortune telling? – and rolled your eyes the entire time Jayna was getting her cards read. Said you'd find yourself in deep dark water and come see zir then. You still wouldn't have, except zie specifically told you about the birds.

They're on every building, bus sign, and ledge up and down the block. Pigeons, black-winged ravens, cheery sparrows, even a robin unsettingly silent and out of place in the big city. You never see them fly. It's not like they follow you, alighting and landing as you go. They're just there – every time you stop to look around, beady little eyes square on you.

You're not hallucinating the birds. Nor are you imagining the voices – the whispers that grow louder in the twilight hours – or the strange color you couldn't see before. Two nights ago, after a little too much booze and Quintin's excellent homegrown weed, something just shifted in your brain, and you can't turn it off. That's why you're here – to get the fortune teller to turn it off so you can go back to normal.

The robin stares at you, like it's telling you normal is overrated. Normal means two crappy jobs, both minimum wage with your manager demanding free hours to show "company spirit." Normal means living in a crappy apartment you can never hope to own. Normal means endless bowls of ramen to stretch your money. Normal also means seeing your dad without noticing that growing black spot on his chest though. It means meeting your HER date without hearing her think you're too short or too fat. You flip off the robin and go inside.

The laundromat is nearly empty. You see the same redhead as before, loading the same machine. Her laundry looks the same too, plastic basket overflowing with faded blues and greens. You watch as a teal sock tumbles to the ground – exactly the same as before. The redhead stops, like she can feel you watching, and her head starts to turn in your direction. You avert your gaze and walk on towards the back.

"Good instincts." The oracle is in zir usual spot. Zie's smoking a vape, the artificial scent of vanilla filling the air.

"I came to–" you start.

"I know why you came," zie interrupts, "and I can't. No one can. Can't climb up the rabbit hole, baby girl – there's no going home for Alice."

You open your mouth to protest, when zie shows you zir free hand. It's closed in a loose fist, and you can see silver light radiate between zir fingers. Zie opens zir hand to reveal three laundromat coins.

"Pick one," zie says. They look identical to you – some blend of metals supposed to look like copper, the laundromat's stamped logo worn smooth from use. You pick the far left.

"Ah," the fortune teller declares,"I knew you had good instincts – you picked freedom!"

It's Orphans all the way Down

Welcome to the outside, kid. You had your choice of safety, freedom, and power – and you chose freedom. You'll probably regret it, we all do at some point, but here you are today: bright-eyed, fresh-faced, and totally confident in your path. Remember that feeling later.

Orphans, then. First thing you can do is forget that name. It's how the Trads call us, like not being in their

club means we have no one to look after us. Now some outcasts are reclaiming the term, but I'm old school and I don't like it. Use it when my back is turned if you must — I won't begrudge you code switching — but don't use it in conversation with me.

We're as old as magick itself. Think about it—someone had to start the first Tradition, so there were mages before then. Mages without Tradition: that's us. Don't ever let any of those assholes tell you we're not *traditional*.

Most of the time, outcasts are exactly that. We band together with our chosen family when we have to, but there's a reason we chose independence over everything else. Maybe you learned early on not to trust anyone. Maybe you're a cocky son of a bitch who thinks she doesn't need anyone. Maybe you just don't play well with others. Whatever it was, you chose to go it alone, and that's a hard habit to break. We find alliances where we must, but really, we prefer to stay off the battlefield entirely when we can — let other people fight over who has the biggest stick. Or we did. Times are changing and we don't always have the luxury of staying on the outside. I blame capitalism. No, really — except we're fighting over *reality* rather than money.

Magick is real, right — but it's not always real. Sometimes you pay an arm and a leg to make it work, and other times it doesn't work at all. It's fickle, in its own way. But imagine if your brand of magick was real, like all the time. Some people — some groups — have that. They somehow made their magick more real than the rest, and they're using that to hog all of it. Like how you need money to make money. That's been going on for ages, and the groups involved used to balance each other out. They'd fight, win and lose some ground between, and we'd move in the spaces they left unclaimed. Except now the Men in Suits claimed victory, and they got the magick to back that up. In the face of one fat shark rising to the top we — well, to stay with the metaphor, we needed to unionize.

That's where the Disparate Alliance comes in. They're on the outside like us. Now I won't say we joined them 'cause that would be a lie. But we like them better than any of the other folk, which I guess counts for something. We still don't let any assholes tell us what to do, but we can call on them when the chips come down.

Becoming an Orphan

Outcasts come from all walks of magick. Most of them are like you — not particularly powerful, not too talented, and certainly not important enough for anyone to tutor or kill. Don't give me that look — those are good traits. People like you slip under the radar, even though you don't even know there is a radar. You're happily oblivious to anything to do with Traditions or the Men in Suits.

If you're very lucky, it stays that way, and you live your entire life uneducated and unburdened. If you're unlucky, you're in for a crash course when the Trads or Suit come 'round with their recruitment spiel — and they don't take no for an answer. But most outcasts are like you — and me. We make just enough noise to draw attention from another outcast. I'll teach you the basics — and you're lucky it's me 'cause I'll make it free — and send you on your merry way a little wiser and a little less innocent.

The second broad category of outcasts are older when they Awaken. I don't mean geriatric old, but solidly settled in their life. People in their forties with a career and a family — the last generation to still be homeowners. Anarchists who are committed to their chosen lifepath of *fuck all y'all*. Those people Awaken, and they might not be small fries — but they might simply be too set in their ways to fit in with any of the groups. Then it becomes a matter of weighing how hard it is to forcibly recruit them (pretty hard) and how well they'll fit in (badly) against how much trouble they're causing as independents. Assuming they're not causing paradoxes left and right, even the big groups might decide to pass on recruitment.

Lastly, there's also outcasts with a past. Not noobs and nobodies, but folk who used to be someone — usually a Trad, sometimes a Suit — and then decided they didn't want to be that anymore. Most of these get killed off when old enemies, or their own HR, comes calling; you can't just quit the big league. Those that survive have a plan and the power to make it work. Do not mistake that for safety. They're a danger to themselves and everyone around them. Eventually their defenses or new identity will slip, and the shit's gonna hit the fan. You don't wanna be in the splatter zone.

The Orphan Survival Guide

You're an outcast. You've got some friends, but they're stragglers, loners, or just plain unreliable, so basically, it's just you. How do you stay alive in this dog-eat-dog world? Let's start with the obvious.

Walk Softly

They can't hurt you if they can't see you. Or catch you. So I guess it's really "walk softly or run fast." Don't let the Sleepers see you. Don't do anything that upsets reality. That way lies a visit of the big league, be they Trads or Suits — or worse — getting sucked into some Paradox hole you'll never crawl out of. I'm not saying, "don't use

magic," or even "stick to the low-level stuff." I *am* saying go for the non-flashy effects that you can quietly fold into reality.

Giving someone sticky shoes is a great way to slow them down, and it doesn't draw any attention. Guns jam all the time, and phones freeze. Heck, even a lucky mirror reflection can blind someone. Remember, technology comes with an IOS even if it's all privatized. What are the odds facial recognition software is just getting a forced update as you pass by? It's not a lot — but it's not impossible either. Specialize in magick that passes as coincidence or luck.

The Night is Dark

Beware things that go bump in the night, for you are soft and delicious with ketchup. Or whatever the meme is. Point being: magick users aren't the only players out there. I've heard tales of vampires and werewolves alike — though I never had the misfortune of meeting one, so maybe they're not real. In a world where magick is real though, do you really want to bet on Bigfoot being a hoax? Didn't think so. If you suspect goings on of the third kind, walk softly, run fast, and get the hell outta dodge.

While you do have territory though, make sure you know it by heart. Where are the abandoned buildings — and are they really *abandoned*? Where are the sewer entrances, and does their darkness offer a stinky escape or a quick death? Which subway train is always empty? Spend your days mapping. Maybe your nights, too, if you're quiet enough to avoid the monsters. That'll do three things: tell you which places to avoid, tell you where you might get help (for a price), and alert you to changes when they happen. The latter is crucial, though easily overlooked; one pawn turning into a queen changes the entire chessboard to a kill zone. Keep your bag packed so you can leave in a hurry.

Beggars can't be Choosers

You chose this life; you gave up power for freedom. Or, if not power, at least social standing and back-up. Be practical — and by that I mean opportunistic. Don't hesitate to snatch up whatever the big players leave behind. "I'll take it" will get you farther than aiming for the stars — enough crumbs make a loaf. This especially applies to territory. Prime real estate is prime for a reason. Let others fight over the banking district, Club Aspen, or whatever is hip nowadays. You take the street corner bodega; good enough is good enough. Who knows, maybe once the dust settles everyone involved will be so weakened you can take Aspen too — if you want to risk it, because once you make a grab for power you can never let go.

Technology is your Friend

It's not really, because technology is not an anthropomorphic entity and does not have feelings. You'll also have to contend with the Suits, who are really good at this shit. And tracking cookies suck balls. But having said that, you can make technology work for us. Most other mages don't give a shit about it, so you don't have to worry about anyone laying a claim. The Suits are so arrogant — and used to being sole masters of technology — they won't even notice you in their backyard so long as you're real quiet.

An acquintance of mine developed an app that detects magick fluctuations — basically lets you know when someone is using magick nearby. It requires literal blood to use, but it's still handy. Another person I know developed an actual spirit detector; it detects ghosts and lets you talk to them. She makes a killing on iTunes, even after the money's been funneled back to her through several companies. Now I don't recommend putting your app on iTunes — she's gonna get herself killed real soon, I suspect — but it's still good to know your technomancy.

Best part is you can usually install your tech magick on someone else's device, if they're willing to let you mess with the OS. That gives you something to trade, and who knows what else you can install while you're at it.

Mind your Debts

People will offer to teach even lowly little you. Others will save you from trouble if they can, either out of some sense of kinship or to gain your debt. Some of your mentors and rescuers will be outcasts like you — like me — who just wanna pay it forward. Make no mistake, we'll still ask something in return, but it'll be reasonable. I try not to ask people for favors that get them killed, nor do I take more than they can miss (though it might sting a little).

Others, however, are like payday loan sharks preying on the destitute. They offer what you desperately need now, then yank your leash for years. Sometimes they're even the reason you were in trouble to begin with; never trust a savior whose arrival seems a little too fortuitous.

Choose your mentors carefully, and always be mindful of your debt — which is not the same as paying your debt. You can always cut and run, if you're ready to look over your shoulder for a long time. Weigh what they did for you, what they can still do for you, and decide what it's worth. It's as simple as that. Our community is non-existent enough that no one except your original debtor will know

you forfeited. You can change cities, change names, start over if you have to. If you ever do find the reasonable ones, hold onto them. These could be your new family. And speaking of...

Find your Family

I don't necessarily mean other magick users. I mean Sleepers. The internet is a great way to meet people; just don't say anything you wouldn't in a room full of government agents. Women's shelters, queer communities, immigrants — these are all people who know how to pick their battles and disappear if they have to. Now don't go grifting. You gotta have their back if they have yours; that's only fair (and they'll know when you're bullshitting them). But these people make some of the best chosen family you can find.

The bonus of making a home among the vulnerable is that they always keep an eye out for danger. They know when the cops come 'round more often than usual. Or when that bar starts flying white pride symbols. Their enemies might not always be the same as yours, but learn to read between the lines and you'll find enough overlap. The Suits like to work with the police or, worse, ICE. It's not even that Suits hate immigrants, but ICE is great at surveillance and breaking the law. You find Trads entrenched among new age religions, free masons, and Evangelists. The learning curve to figure out who hides where doesn't yield much room for error, but it's always been sink or swim for us.

Here's a special trick: find religion. I know, I just said that's where the Trads hide out. But remember: beggars, choosers. Find the places *they're not*. Religious communities — the good ones — look out for their own. Find one you like, ideally one that suits your brand of magick, and make a place for yourself.

Good religious folk will give you a bed and a warm meal. Just don't go places you don't belong; your Anglo-Saxon ass won't have a good time trying to call on Papa Legba. I don't particularly care that it's cultural appropriation — though it is — but it's also plain bad sense.

Carry a Big Stick

Make sure you have one big showstopper, just in case everything else fails. This is your big, flashy, pack-up-and-leave earth scorcher. You know, in case you're neither invisible nor fast enough. It only needs to work once, and briefly, so long as you capitalize on it. Your aim isn't to take your enemies out, but to create an opening to escape. It's like any self-defense class teaches: Knee them in the groin, then run.

What does that look like? You tell me — what can you do? Buddy of mine stole some zap gun off some Suits and retrofitted it. That's generally a bad idea, but those things can knock out just about anything. Maybe you can translocate to a safe haven. That's probably above your ken, but it's a plan if you can also ride out the reality backlash. Another friend of mine spent years cozying up to the local spirits; she's got enough markers with them that they'll hide her if she calls them in.

If you ever need a big stick and find yourself without — maybe you're one of them folk who drew the short end of the magick straw — you have one chance left. Fake it. Sometimes you don't need to have an ace up your sleeve as much as you need people to think you do. Cast a big shadow, that sort of thing. Get your poker face on, look them right in the eye, and ask

if they really wanna do this. I don't wanna lie — they'll probably call your bluff and kill you — but you were gonna die at this point anyway. Nothing to lose.

Even with an ace up your sleeve, picking your battles is crucial as always. Are you sure you can't just take the hit and move on? Because pulling out the big guns turns survivors into enemies, alerts people to your presence and tells people what you can do if push comes to shove. Might just be better to cut your losses on this one.

Survival over Victory

Always keep an eye to your survival. Don't tussle with the big girls. Not even — especially not even — if you can win. Winning draws attention, and are you really sure you can take the next challenger too? Unless you can win — and make off with the prize — without anyone noticing, your low profile gives you better odds in the long run than a quick win. Be very sure that participation trophy is worth it, 'cause in the end, everything except the breath you draw through your lungs is just that.

Also, don't play the hero; self-sacrifice ain't us, baby. Yes, I know, you made a community for yourself bla bla. If you did what I said — be involved and don't grift — you already paid back what you got. You don't owe them your life just because you're friends. Ah. I recognize that look. You're gonna find this one out the hard way. That's okay, all outcasts do. If you won't put your survival over theirs, at least keep in mind sometimes you offer them the best odds by being elsewhere.

Now quick — how many exits to this room? You had to look! You should *never* have to look. The moment you walk into a place, you should have a full map of possible and confirmed exits. No — *before* you walk into a place. There's blueprints. Heck, there's 3D tours on social media. If shit goes down, you should have your escape plan ready with a back-up in place. On that note — how many weapons mounted on my walls? And are you sure we're the only people here? No one snuck in behind you while I distracted you by talking? Ugh. Noob.

Paths Not Walked

Reality is not singular. There's many futures, and we're only exploring one of them. Ours is a universe of tentative victories and failed truces. There's another, though, where the Nine soundly defeated the Suits years ago. We're not part of the Disparate Alliance in that universe. Why would we be? There's no need without a single victor to unite against.

The riddles of the Sphinx capture us in another universe. We've always listened for its voice, cutting through the darkness with answers that lead only to more questions. It's not our friend — never was — but we don't know that. We follow its riddles all the way down into servitude.

We've all Fallen in another universe. We were too divided, too distracted by our own squabbles, to even notice them slink in from the dark recesses of reality. They infiltrated the Suits, used them to take down the Nine, and then they came for everyone else. We all toil under the devil's yoke in that place.

Frenemies

Most of us practice magick by ourselves. If we're lucky, sentimental, or naive enough, we might operate in a small group of three or four magick users. Doesn't mean we can't make friends — and enemies — in strange places though.

Trads

The Nine Traditions of Doissetep — don't even ask how I know that name. The High Council. The Ivory Tower. Whatever you call them, these people are self-important dickheads. How do you recognize them? Well, for starters they introduce themselves by asking which Tradition you belong to. That's kinda a big deal to them. They're not all evil dickheads though, so you have some room to work with there. Just make whatever deal you need, tell them *thanks no thanks* when they invite you to their club du jour, and get out. Try not to burn any bridges, 'cause dickheads keep grudges.

Suits

Even. Worse. These are the capitalists I was talking about — the big shark gobbling up all magick. Like any good villain they don't think of themselves as evil, and I recommend you work that angle if you're ever face to face with them. Agree with whatever their hot take on *saving humankind* is. Just nod yes and watch your P's and Q's. Suggest that everyone here — especially yourself — is a reasonable person and surely you can come to an arrangement. The moment their guard drops, run for the hills and never come back. Never mind any bridges. If there's only one river between you and them, you didn't run far enough.

Fallen

Rumors persist that *fallen* mages have infiltrated, or even control, the Trads and Suits — though I've never been able to find out what they fell from. Or to. Maybe it's just a general *fallen from grace* reference? I used to think it was bullshit, the magick equivalent of QAnon hysterics about the Deep State. But then — well, that's personal.

Suffice to say I think the boogeymen might be real. They prey on the vulnerable and weak — which all too often means us — offering help at the low, low price of your soul. I only met the one, so I don't know if they share any defining features. Just beware of the darkness, I guess.

The Disparates

The Disparates are not your family. They're not even your friends. But they make halfway decent allies. The Disparate Alliance is a collection of small-fry Crafts caught in an ocean of bigger sharks. Like us, they're struggling to survive, constantly weighing silence as both granting protection and silencing your own voice.

We're explicitly not a *member* of the Alliance by virtue of we're not a Craft, but they're good people to know. Most Disparates try to keep their end of any bargain; they expect us to do the same, so use that as you will. You scratch my back, I scratch yours (if I didn't skip town), and then we go our own way. You can find them through the grapevine and on the streets. Look for their symbols in graffiti tags. Keep an eye out for any magick users among marginalized communities. They might even run in the same circles as you, which means you can make an ally if you play your cards right (or a rival if you don't). I met a Hippolytoi when I was running *Sisters and Daughters*, and after a rocky start, we've been great... well not friends, but friend-adjacents.

Ngoma

The Ngoma style themselves the leaders of the Disparate Alliance. The other Crafts would disagree with that claim—loudly—but here's what matters: They usually do follow the Ngoma's leads. Which means these are the people you need to impress. Assuming there's a Ngoma among the local Disparates; it's not a homogeneous entity. You impress them by being smart, honest, anti-racist and not cracking Wakanda jokes.

Hollow Ones

These were part of the Ivory Tower when I left. They were the *Tenth Tradition among the Council of Nine* — and that right there tells you everything. They might have their own Craft, but they're outcasts all the same. Don't step on their toes, and you'll find them not exactly welcoming, but at least silently tolerant of your presence. I found them great company if you can put up with the brooding and the Byron quotes.

Character and Traits

Orphans are fiercely independent, often clueless about the Ascension War (no one ever *told* them!), and very scrappy. They have a penchant for technomancy, if only because most Traditions stay out of it (and the average orphan doesn't even register on the Technocracy's shit list).

Concepts

Orphans hail from all backgrounds. Here are three concepts to make your own.

The Wild Talent

BOOM. One spark — one little apartment fire — and your existence ignited. The fire department said it was a faulty electrical outlet, but you're not sure. You can see colors move between electronic devices, and sometimes you can move them. Then there's the whispers in the dark.

You're still not convinced this isn't just a bad trip—you did try Emmie's new cocktail—but you're pretty sure you can *do* things now. Your scratch tickets are all coming up winners, even if it's only a couple bucks (but maybe you should *push* it). You haven't missed a single appointment time, though you're not sure *that* has any value.

You haven't told anyone yet. You're worried it's not true, and they'll diagnose you with some psychotic disorder to lock you away. Or worse, that it is true, and the police will come to, well.... So, you keep quiet, hoping for the best and listening to the whispers.

The Wintershiner

You're too busy for this shit. You have three kids, a wife who works full-time, and your own career to manage. Meanwhile, you've started seeing actual ghosts, and maybe the spirit of your Monstera Variegata — which you need to water more. Whatever this superhero origin movie bullshit is, you don't want it. Except there was the time when LeShaun fell, and you really did kiss it better. Or when you had the urge to move up your pap smear — and it's a good thing you caught that early. Maybe you should explore this? See if there's other people who can help you manage whatever *this* is? You just need to find an opening in your schedule — perhaps after the girls' soccer practice and before date night.

The App Developer

You wrote your first program when you were nine, connecting your wheelchair to the school disco strobe lights. Absolutely worth the detention, and you'd do it again. You sold your first app — for far too little and ill-advisedly under your stepfather's name — when you were twelve. You've only gotten better. Code speaks to you, and you mean that literally. Your latest app lets you lift things with your phone. From a distance, like telekinesis, and you're pretty sure that doesn't follow the laws of nature.

And then, Maddy showed up. You traded zir the app and zie traded you, well, a whole lot of confusing stuff about the internet being an actual web? You still need to work through all the pieces of code, voice memos, and random notes zie left you, but you can already tell it's gonna be worth it.

Tips and Tricksters

Here are several Merits and rotes suitable for orphans.

Technomancer/ There's an App for That (2–3 pt. Supernatural Merit)

Your magick skirts close to the technological consensus. While you yourself never mistake it for anything but magick, you're an expert at presenting it so bystanders think it's the cutting edge of science or — even better — an app.

For two dots, halve (round up) the Paradox you gain from your highest Sphere when botching a vulgar Effect without witnesses. For four dots, halve (round up) the Paradox you gain from your highest Sphere when botching a vulgar Effect with witnesses.

I'm Good

(•• or ••• Life)

Orphans living on the streets tend to indulge in a rock 'n roll lifestyle while fueling their body with dumpster-dived food. It's not the best for your health.

System: This Effect lets you shake off any high, low, or physical illness you picked up so you're good as new. Life ••• allows you to get your friends on their feet too.

This is a coincidental Effect.

Subway Map of the Supernatural

(•• Correspondence, • Prime, often combined with • Spirit/Life/Matter)

Traveling the city using a map and dowsing device, you discern where other supernatural entities reside. This only works if they're in the area for some time so you can pick up their "signature" (what Trads call Resonance) and if it's unopposed. This Effect was invented by an orphan riding the NYC subway, but it works with any city map — digital maps are popular now.

System: If you're unfortunate enough to know that other things besides mages exist, you can use additional Spheres to pinpoint them: Matter • for vampires and Hit Marks, Life • for werewolves and changelings, and Spirit • for wraiths. Otherwise, they all just ping as "supernatural," which is honestly fine — you should be avoiding the lot of them anyway.

This is a coincidental Effect.

Grapevine

(•• Correspondence, •• Mind, sometimes combined with •• Time)

People tell you things. You overhear stuff. You're great at connecting what one person said with an unrelated anecdote from another person, and teasing out the hidden thread.

System: You can ask *general* questions about the city and its inhabitants of your Storyteller — like which areas people avoid, where you can score the best designer drugs, and where the streetlamps never work. Unlike Contacts, this information hails from beyond your usual network. It doesn't reveal information that people actively keep hidden, like where the blood suckers hide.

Time •• allows you to ask the same questions about later today or tomorrow.

This is a coincidental Effect.

Bum a Meal / Fool's Gold

(••• Mind)

Beggars can't be choosers — but sometimes they can be thieves. Originally used to beg a cigarette or meal off people, nowadays this Effect is used to make baristas and cashiers believe you're giving them a handful of coins.

System: This effect only works on unAwakened mortals. This is a coincidental Effect, but beware the unaffected person in line behind you who thinks you're pulling a fast one.

Revelation

(••• Life or Mind)

Open your eyes, baby, and then open them again.

Some orphans do get into the Ascension War — or at least their own little slice of it. Find a place where people are already open to mind-altering Effects like a rave or, ever popular, a New Age Spirit shop. Then make them experience reality like you do, either in mind or body. Most orphans deliver this Effect through a favored medium like drugs, music, or crystals.

System: Using Life to affect a target's body, or Mind to affect their brain, the orphan briefly forces someone to experience the world's possibilities as an Awakened would. It grants them no magick, only the knowing that reality is malleable.

This is a coincidental Effect but relies on your targets being in an open mindset and near you. While the Effect itself is coincidental, having a club full of people tweet about "seeing reality" still draws attention.

Not Me

(• • • Mind, sometimes combined with • • • Correspondence)

You are definitely not the kid the cops are looking for. Nor are you the Reality Deviant the Suits want. You're just a nobody going to their uninteresting job — something generic like a barista, people are sure — and not worth a closer look.

System: This Effect works directly on peoples' minds, which means it doesn't matter if their Deviancy Detector is pinging you; they still interpret your reading as coming back green. This also means that unless you pair Mind with Correspondence • • •, it doesn't work on people observing you through a traffic camera or CTV from an office away.

This is a coincidental Effect.

Don't Touch My Shit

(• • • Life or Mind, • • Matter, sometimes coupled with • • • Matter/Spirit)

This Effect serves as a ward. It's often used on doors (if you have a home) or bags (if you don't). Coupled with Mind, people simply overlook your belongings. Coupled with Life, you can choose to make them feel extremely dizzy (enough that they need to sit down) or give them a nasty "static electric" shock.

System: The Effect as-is works on all living things, which includes werewolves and changelings. If for some reason you made an enemy of a ghost (why did you do that?) you'd best couple it with Spirit • • •, and you need Matter • • • to ward against vampires or Hit Marks (but really, at this point what are you doing?!?).

This Effect is coincidental.

the World below

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- Bolade Atwan, Proxy of Upeo wa Macho, November 2122

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- The Wu Lung have a long fight behind them and an even longer one ahead.
- The Orphans insist they're not part of any Alliance. That's fair — they can still hang.

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